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THE TERRIBLE TONKAWAY; or, OLD ROCKY AND HIS PARDS.

A WILD TALE OF A WILD TEXAN TRAIL.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,

AUTHOR OF "DARK DASHWOOD," "WILD WILL, THE MAD RANCHERO," "KIT CARSON, JR," ETC., ETC., ETC.



"HOLD HIM BACK! HOLD THE RED FIEND BACK! I'LL SIGN THE PAPER! I'LL SIGN IT!"

The Terrible Tonkaway;

OR,

OLD ROCKY AND HIS PARDS.

A Wild Tale of a Wild Texan Trail.

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BRAVO," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LOCK OF HAIR.

The time of which we write is a score of years ago, and our first scene opens amid the most picturesque Bandera Hills, in the Lone Star State, at a point near a small stream which, some few miles further south, empties its waters into Hondo Creek, a tributary of the Rio Frio.

The sun has disappeared, leaving a red glare upon the western horizon, which shoots upward gradually, blending with the azure of mid-heavens, and reflecting its ruby tints upon the emerald leaves of the oaks, which stand in small, regular mottes within the valleys, and between the scattered elevations.

To the north is a range of hills, almost covered with a growth of mesquites; while, to the south, the tall pecan trees mark the course of the stream; which winds its serpentine way in an easterly direction.

From the range of hills the land slopes gradually down to the creek bottom, being covered with a rich carpet of grass and flowers, but broken, as we have noticed, by post-oak mottes, which greatly beautify the scene.

Beneath these small groves, and also in the bottom timber, the shades of evening have fallen. A full round moon rises high above the horizon on the east, the kiss of the day-god playing upon its silvery face like a blush of modesty, as it seemingly waits for the last farewell rays of its blazing lord to disappear, when it promises a glorious night.

As the crimson glare sinks slowly, the thick foliage, with the drooping moss and vines, cause it to be quite dark beneath the oaks and among the bottom timber, and, at this particular moment, all nature seems hushed into oppressive silence.

There is not a sign of human life within the limits of the scene, but here and there a small herd of deer wander listlessly through the grass and flowers, showing by their undisturbed manner that they are at home, where the crack of the rifle seldom startled them.

Now and then a cotton-tail rabbit leaps above the bunch grass near the bottom, having just crawled from its cone-shaped dwelling of sticks and leaves within the underbrush to feast upon the delicate dew-laved sward.

Suddenly the bucks rear their antlered heads and snuff the air in alarm. Then they dash into the timber, followed by their mates, while the timid rabbits cower amid the grass as the clatter of iron-clad hoofs breaks the deathlike silence of the scene.

Just as the rosy tint upon the oak-leaves has begun to disappear, and the glassy foliage is silvered by the moon's rays, a horseman gallops around the gravelly base of the ridge, and halts suddenly within a rifle-shot of the timber that borders the creek. As the lone rider jerks his panting mustang to its haunches, his eyes sweep up and down the line of towering pecans, wandering hither and thither with piercing gaze between the mottes, while his face wore an expression of surprise and disappointment.

The horseman is quite young, not over two-and-twenty, but with a physique and bearing that would at once command attention, even in a crowd. His features are regular and handsome, his nose and lips are small, as is also his chin; and his face, taken all in all, would be considered effeminate were it not for the dark brown flashing eyes, the delicate mustache and slight imperial.

The tan of sun and wind, and the smoke of camp-fires prove him not unused to frontier life; as do also his polished arms, which consist of a Sharp's rifle, that hangs at his saddle-horn, and a brace of Colt's army revolvers, with a huge bowie-knife. These last are supported about his waist by a richly stamped belt, the heavy silver clasp of which is engraved in a highly ornamental manner, with a large five-pointed star in its center.

His costume consists of buckskin leggins, deeply fringed down the outer seams, these being thrust into the tops of strong boots; a blue woollen shirt, with wide collar loosely confined at the neck, while a large blue silk handkerchief hangs under the left arm, two of its corners being knotted over his right shoulder. A soft, wide-brimmed sombrero sits jauntily on the back of his head, making up his costume; but a serape and buckskin jaqueta secured in a

neat roll at the cantle of his saddle, together with a canteen, tin-cup, well-filled saddle-bags, and a long lasso, show that he is prepared for the trail, be it long or short, wet or dry.

For a moment the lone rider inspects the view. Then, with an air of disappointment, he loosens his rifle from its holder, tosses the weapon into the hollow of his left arm, and throwing his right leg over the horn of his saddle, sat in a position often taken by rangers of the plains at a short halt, while animals are drinking, or even on the march, to relieve the weary limbs.

Sitting thus, he again seeks to pierce the dark shades, while his horse tears the rich grass from the sod, regardless of bit and bridle-rein. It was but for a moment, however, when the warning of the "pest of the prairies" sounds on the air, immediately in his rear, and his mustang, with a snort, springs forward and whirls about to face the danger, the rider meanwhile recovering his correct position in the saddle with a lightning-like movement, his features showing at the first alarm and then extreme satisfaction, as he cries out:

"Rattlesnake! Are you here pard?"

"Rattlesnake here," was the laconic reply.

The new-comer was an Indian of commanding presence, with naught above his waist-belt to hide his supple, wiry form, except the narrow bead-covered strap which supported the bow and quiver at his back. Buckskin leggins, breech-clout and moccasins incased the lower portion of his sinewy frame; the leggins being held in place by an ornamental fillet, while encircling his neck was a collar made from the claws of a bear.

His black and piercing eyes glittered from out bars of vermilion, daubed upon cheek and brow; while, upon his broad breast, done in different colored pigments, was an exact representation of a rattlesnake, coiled as if for deadly spring. His long hair, black as night, was thrown over his shoulders, and confined, with three eagle-feathers, by a narrow, beaded strap.

"I'm glad to see you, my red pard," said the white man, as he dismounted and grasped the hand of the red-man. "I knew you would not break your word and promise to me, but I began to fear when I arrived and found you were not here to meet me, that some misfortune had befallen you."

"Rattlesnake tell Shooting Star when ten suns had smiled in his face, and the round moon came up from the big waters, he meet him here. Rattlesnake's tongue is not forked."

"I am well aware of that fact. I would trust you far more than I would nine out of ten white men. But what news have you? Has the keen eye of my red brother seen the hoof-prints of Apache ponies on the prairies?"

"The squaws and papposes of the log-house builders will hear Apache war-cries on Medina before moon grows small."

A shadow of deep concern, mingled with some surprise, filled the face of him who had been addressed as Shooting Star.

"How does my red brother know that the Apaches are on the war-path toward the Medina?"

"Rattlesnake has seen the red fires of the ranchos on Guadalupe. He has seen Apache braves. The death-yells of Texanos have filled his ears. The belts of the warriors of the Pecos are heavy with scalps. Their mustangs will swim the waters of the Medina. Rattlesnake has spoken. Lies build not their nest on his tongue."

"You fill my mind with apprehension. Are there any new settlers on the prairies, coming to build homes between San Antonio and this country?"

"Rattlesnake see so many wagons," holding up four fingers. "The camp-fire was this side of Apache trail."

"Which way are these wagons pointed?"

The Indian turned in his tracks and, pointing southward, uttered but a single word:

"Hondo."

"On the Hondo?" questioned Shooting Star, in concern and surprise. "By Heavens, they must be warned of their great danger at once! Did you stop in the company of the train?"

"Go in camp when sun come. Eat venison, smoke pipe. Then come fast meet Shooting Star."

"What portion of the State are these settlers from?"

"Come where Brazos runs in Big Water Salt."

This answer was delivered in a peculiarly significant manner; the Indian meanwhile standing with folded arms, and watching the young scout intently.

Shooting Star, the breech of whose rifle was resting on the sward, himself leaning upon the weapon, no sooner heard the words of Rattlesnake than he jerked up his rifle into the hollow of his arm, at the same time speaking quickly, and as if intensely excited:

"What mean you, my red pard! You know not how your words strike me to the heart. You are sure that these people who are in such deadly danger, came from the Lower Colorado and the Brazos country?"

"Rattlesnake has spoken," said the Indian, with something of affront in his words and manner.

"Were there any women in the party?"

This question was asked by the young scout in a very excited manner, with his form bent forward toward the red-man, his eyes staring into the painted face.

"So many," holding up five fingers. "One got heap long hair like sun. See hair totem." And the Indian took from his pouch a lock of golden hair, which he passed to Shooting Star. "She send to my white brother. See him ride fast on San Antonio Plaza, when big wagons there."

As the young man saw and grasped the lock of hair, his form trembled, his rifle fell to the earth, and pressing brow with one hand and the souvenir to his lips with the other, he cried out from his very soul:

"My God! I thank thee!"

For a moment he stood thus, gazing upward, then, assuming a more natural position, he asked:

"My red brother saw the maiden. How did she look?"

As he spoke, he noticed among the grass a beautiful pink flower, which he stooped to pluck, and then placed with the lock of hair in his bosom.

"Got color on cheek like flower. Rattlesnake's heart grow big when she look in his eyes and speak. The Great Spirit has painted her cheeks, and the sun has played with her hair. It shines like the gold that the pale-faces dig in the land of the Piutes."

"Did she send no talk paper?"

"No time. Heap people on Plaza. Say, see Rattlesnake ride on Plaza with young white brave. Young white brave my friend. See friend, give hair. See once more on Hondo. White men with wagons no like Rattlesnake. Think bad Indian. So ride fast to Bandera."

"Great Heavens! Can it be that Laura, who was to have been my wife when the black cloud fell and drove me from my home, is on this wild frontier? If not, who could have sent me this sunshine curl?"

"Shooting Star is a great brave," said the Indian, "but his cheeks would be wet with the tears of sorrow, if the white squaw's scalp hung from an Apache belt."

"How know you this, my red pard! It is but a few days since you and I parted, and at that time we had been together on the plains for many moons."

"The little birds sung it in the ears of Rattlesnake."

"Those little birds seem to be pretty well posted, but they are a little off the trail, pard. In place of weeping, if the owner of this hair is the one I hope—oh, God! should that beautiful girl, or angel, I ought to say, come to harm through Indian or outlaw, my brain would be scorched to the fever of madness, and my tears be dried up forever! Much as I love this wild, free life on the prairies, and detest man's so-called civilization, I would be happy in her presence, if to bask in her smiles forced me to live in a crowded city—ay, even among those who have wronged me as no man was ever wronged before! Yes, I believe she could influence me in any direction; even to forgive him who has robbed me of my birthright and name, and left me, as I am to-day, dishonored and disgraced!"

As the young scout spoke the last words, he stepped to the side of his horse, and disentangled the bridle-rein from the animal's foot as he arose. The Indian, still with folded arms, stood gazing toward him silent and motionless as a statue.

"Has my red brother nothing to say?"

"Rattlesnake's heart is sad."

"Why so?"

"Shooting Star will take the squaw with the sun hair, and will live again in the wooden lodges of the pale-faces. He will forget his red brother. Rattlesnake's heart will be filled with sorrow, for he will sit alone by his camp-fire. He will forget the war-cry of his people and he will bow his head when his eyes should be open. The Apaches will take him beyond the Pecos, and his death-song will sound from the torture fire. My white brother will not be there with his fast-shooting rifle. Many moons ago Rattlesnake was bound for the torture. The spirits of his fathers were calling him, but Shooting Star saved his scalp. When my white brother's rifle sounds no more on the prairies, then Rattlesnake will sing his death song."

"Wa-al, I reckon yer better start on wi' hit jist 'bout now, an' be kinder speedy wi' yer tongue music, 'thout much mindin' ther chorus."

As the first words struck the ears of Shooting Star and Rattlesnake, the former cocked his rifle, and brought his weapon at once to bear upon the thick brush of an adjacent motte from whence the voice proceeded, and the latter drew his bow and fitted, an arrow to the string; but scarce half a dozen words had been uttered, when they both lowered their weapons for not only did they recognize the speaker by the sound of his voice, but by his form as well, for even as he spoke, he stumbled toward them.

CHAPTER II.

THE SUCCESSFUL STAMPEDE.

He was a small man, with long grizzly hair and beard, his face much wrinkled, but although age had stamped its merciless mark, the bright piercing eyes, the supple step, and the springy movement of his body as he advanced, showed him to be one who, although long accustomed to the trials and privations of the border, was still good for many years' service.

He was clothed in much-worn, greasy buckskin leggings, thrust into cow-hide boots, a dark woolen shirt, and an old sombrero that seemed to have been used alternately for fanning into flame a smoldering camp-fire and wiping out a frying-pan.

This new arrival, gentle reader, is none other than "Old Rocky," one of the most celebrated scouts of the great South-west, and whose real name is James Young, although but few know it, even of those who have been closely associated with him.

"Old Rocky! By all that's lucky!" exclaimed Shooting Star, as he lowered his rifle, bringing the butt of the weapon heavily to the ground.

"Waugh!" burst from his companion, as he allowed his bow to unbend, and replaced the arrow within his quiver.

"Wa-al, I reckon hit are; but yer wouldn't 'a' knowed bit ef I hedn't 'a' spit my music. Rattlesnake, I reckon yer 'bout kerrect. This are a favorable time ter air thet death-song o' yourn, er I are a dod-blasted puserlanimus pervaricator. Ye're a pa'r o' ther softest dang'd fools I ever struck on ther plains, an' I hed a doosid good notion ter lay low, an' 'low yer ter git yer heads skinned. Yer needn't pear ter notice nothin', but I kin tell yer whar ter take a peep on ther sly thet'll make yer ha'r crawl like scotched snakes, pards. Ther mesquites on ther hill yunder is chuck full ov 'Paches, b'idin' over wi' the'r nat'ral cussedness an' stud-hoss dangnation. They'd 'a' jumped yer by this time, ef I hedn't 'a' broke brush. Rattlesnake, take yer lasso, an' we'll git some wood, 'pearin' ter be goin' ter camp in ther motte, but 'stead o' that, we'll skute fer t'other side ther drink, an' levant at full stampede. Our h'ar ain't wuth shucks ef we step on the wrong spot, er git a eyewinker crossed. We're playin' a bluff game fer our lives, pards, an' hit's got ter be played brash on ther jump, er we won't hev time ter warble our death-songs afore we're shoved inter kingdom come on ther whiz, an' without ha'r et that! When I holler 'Bill!' Shootin' Star, yer kin sling yer yell t'other side ther drink."

Not a single motion of the body, or even a trace of surprise, was shown by either the young scout or the Indian, as this startling intelligence was communicated by Old Rocky.

Rattlesnake's back was toward the hill, but Shooting Star, as he cast his glance quickly upward, saw here and there, peering through the mesquite bushes, the hideously-painted faces of the Apaches, who crouched on the hillside so sure of their victims that they were not particular in secreting themselves.

There is no doubt whatever, but our two friends would have been instantly killed, had not the old scout sprung from his point of observation just at the right moment, thus causing the Indians to delay springing upon them, thinking that probably others were in the motte, and that by waiting longer they would secure more scalps.

As Old Rocky brought his remarks to an end, the same having been spoken in a rapid manner, he stepped to the horse of the young scout, detached a lasso from the cantle of the saddle, and walked slowly, followed by Rattlesnake, and without showing the least concern, toward the hill at the base of which were a few plain mesquite trees much larger than those beyond, under which the Apaches lay crouched, and having several dead limbs upon them. This wood is the favorite one for kindling camp-fires in the South-west, as it ignites freely, and gives out a quick heat.

The Indians drew themselves from view, and watched their intended victims, satisfied that they could not know of their being in the vicinity. Thus crouched among the mesquites, with eager vengeful glances, the war-whoop ready at any moment to burst from their lips; suddenly, within half a pistol's range of the base of the hill, and almost in the first line of war-painted fiends, Old Rocky halted, turned half around facing the motte from which he had just emerged, and yelled:

"Bill! Oh-h-h-h-h, Bill!"

All was silent as death; and death indeed, and in a most dread and horrible form was hanging over our friends, suspended, as it were, by a hair.

Shooting Star was walking to and fro, gathering fagots amid the oaks, and the old scout watched him with eager eye, until his form was for a moment hidden by the trunk of a tree. Then again he shouted:

"Bill! Oh-h-h-h-h, Bill!"

The next instant came a faint reply, seemingly from the timber beyond the creek, but really from the lips of Shooting Star, who placed his hands in the shape of a tunnel, and forced his voice through the same in a manner which showed not a little practice. This done, the

young scout at once resumed his work of gathering fuel. With a laugh of satisfaction, as the answering call reached his ears, the old scout circled his lasso about his head, and then threw the noose over a dead limb high in the tree. Rattlesnake then grasped the rope, and helped to pull the dead branch crushing to the earth. Again and again was this repeated. Then, gathering their fuel, they walked toward the dense motte, Old Rocky whistling a merry tune as they went. Ahead of him walked Shooting Star, leading his mustang.

"Drap yer wood!" directed the old scout, in a low voice. "Drap yer wood, soon as yer make kiver, an' skute lively fer t'other side ther drink. I foun' yer boss, Rattlesnake, 'fore I come this-a-ways, an' ef I hedn't 'a' see'd ther critter an' struck yer trail, yer'd both bin goners 'fore this time, dead sure an' sartin. My nag's 'long o' yourn. Both on yer levant, an' I'll strike a light hyer ter keep up a sign o' biz, an' fool ther 'Pache scarifiers."

"I'm not going to leave you," stoutly asserted Shooting Star.

"Rattlesnake never turns his back to an Apache," said the Indian, proudly.

"Levant! Slide out! Streak her! Glide lively! Both on yer git, I say, er I'll git es mad es a grizzly, an' chaw yer ears off! Skute, I say, I mean biz, an' I know what I'm 'bout. I'll play ther game, an' not lose a ha'r."

Without another word, Shooting Star threw his wood to earth, sprung upon his horse, and followed by the Tonkaway, both hidden from the view of the Apaches by the timber of the motte, proceeded rapidly to the creek bottom.

On the opposite side of the stream, Rattlesnake had left his mustang previous to his meeting with the young scout, and to the point where the animal had been secured, both the red and the white man made their way.

Singing lustily to himself, the old scout piled wood together ready to ignite, and then sprung to the edge of the motte next to the murder-pregnant hill.

Between him and the elevation, in the bright moonlight, on the clear sward where but a few moments before his friends had stood with him, crawling stealthily toward the motte within which he crouched, were three-score of fierce, war-painted Apaches eager for blood. It was a sight that would have appalled the stoutest heart, but the old scout glided back on his track, coolly struck flint and steel and then igniting a piece of punk, laid the same within some dry leaves and twigs at the base of the pile of wood.

Then, gliding like a ghost through the motte to the pecans of the bottom, Old Rocky ran like a deer, and in a very short space of time burst out from the bushes on the south side of the creek where his pards, Shooting Star and Rattlesnake, anxiously awaited him, sitting their mustangs, and holding the old scout's animal ready for him to mount.

As Old Rocky vaulted into the saddle, the night air rung with the blood-curdling war-whoops of the Apaches, followed by yells of baffled rage, pursuit signals, and rallying cries.

The beautiful motte and the scattered slope were filled with bloodthirsty, red-handed fiends, and the silent night with sounds from pandemonium.

"Sarcumvented ther sculpers, or I'm a thunderin' liar! Pint eastward, pards, toward ther Hondo. Job spurs deep, an' draw blood every time er we mought git corral'd yit, fer our critters ain't fresh by a long shot!"

CHAPTER III.

THE NIGHT RIDE.

"GREAT heavens, Old Rocky!" exclaimed Shooting Star. "Don't head for the Hondo; for, if we do, we'll lead the red murderers down upon innocent women and children. Let us decoy the Apaches toward the north, even at the risk of our lives."

"What has yer got in yer noddle, pard? Who are on ther Hondo wuth riskin' ha'r for?"

"Those whom, if you knew them, you would go through fire to serve, if I am not greatly mistaken. But, anyway, before I turn my horse's head in that direction, I'll face the Apaches."

"Wa-al, I reckon hyer's yer persimmon what'll face ther music too, 'fore he'll fetch harm ter white folks. Yer word's good enough, 'bout takin' ary affyday. Up-stream we goes a-kinin'!" And the trio of prairie pards whirled their mustangs, and galloped at head-long speed north-westward, keeping closely to the timber, and turning a bend to the north just in time to escape the notice of the Indians who had crossed the creek in pursuit. No sooner had they turned the bend, than the old scout, who was in the lead, guided his horse quickly into the timber, fast followed by the Indian and Shooting Star.

"Now, pards, sling gab lively, an' let ther ole man know what's up. What dod-blasted fools yer hes bin! Shootin' Star talkin' 'bout bein' in love with a purty piece o' caliker! Wa-al, I wish't I could laugh. I wish't I could give a ole he laugh. Then ag'in, hyer's Rattlesnake war nigh a-bustin' with sorrer, ter think yer were goin' ter quit ther bizness o' sculpin',

an' leave him ter chaw venison an' buffler alone. Hit war ther most redicklus s-ght I ever see'd. Two boss scouts standin' plum in ther moonlight, with a 'Pache war-party jist a crawlin' down on 'em. Es I said afore, I wish't I could laugh right out; an' I would, ef ther reds wa'n't so dang'd clost. Now, spit it out! Who's below, on ther Hondo?"

"A new settler with four wagons. He has his family with him—women-folks I mean."

"I know'd he hed weemin-folks, er yer wouldn't 'a' bin so pesky fear'd o' glidin' that a-way, pard. An' I kin tell yer, hit won't make a bit o' differ whether we-uns went down on ther Hondo er not; fer yer kin gamble on hit, this hyer war-party is goin' toward ther Frio 'fore they skutes, up kintry fer ther Pecos."

"Then for God's sake, let us get ahead of them, and assist in the defense of the women and children!"

"Pears ter me hit's got ter be did, pard; but we-uns must kinder mix up this 'Pache lay-out sum, ter keep 'em from glidin' down creek afore things is fixed fer fightin' 'em. How many men are ther with ther wagons?"

"I could not say. Rattlesnake brought the news, and with it partial proof that the dearest girl on earth to me is one of the party. That is, I cannot but think she is the one who was to have been my wife. This thought, be it fact or surmise, has caused me to forget all else except her deadly peril. I will explain everything in regard to it, when time and place shall be favorable; but, for heaven's sake, let us do something at once. Hear the yell of those red devils! They are hunting about the bottom for us."

"Foller me, pards, an' we'll give 'em a little rifle of sport, er I'm a pickled persimmon. Loosen yer sixes ready, an' keep clost 'longside this ole raw-hide ripper."

Urging their horses forward, they crossed the stream, and proceeded on until they came to the edge of the timber line to the north, from which point they had a clear view of the opposite side of the hill from where the Apaches had been concealed in the mesquites.

In the little vale to the north of this hill were some sixty horses, which the scouts discovered immediately. They were kept in a nearly compact herd by some half-a-dozen braves; while to the south, up and down the bottom, and beyond the ribbon of timber on the plain, galloped the main portion of the war-party, beating the bottom and the mottes in all directions, with wild and vengeful whoops. As our friends took all this in, the old scout chuckled:

"Didn't I tole yer so, pards? I reckoned on things turnin' out 'bont this-a-ways. Thar's ther purtiest lay-out ter jump an' scatter, I ever see'd. Foller me, an' make yer barkers talk when we strike ther herders, an' yell like thunderation. We'll stampede ther herd, an' then git up an' git for kiver, 'fore ther reds gits this side ther hill. Are yer ready?"

"All set! Give the word," said Shooting Star, as he jerked his revolvers around in front on his belt, and held them ready for use.

The Tonkaway drew his bow, and with an arrow between each finger of his string hand, his eyes blazing with all the war spirit of his tribe, braced himself for the coming fight.

"Spur fer yer lives, pards! Git!"

Neck and neck they dashed from the screen of thick branches, with snorts of pain, urged on by the spurs at terrific speed, toward the herd of Apache mustangs.

With wild yells the scouts bounded around a motte of oaks, and directly upon the startled herders; who, with signal whoops to their comrades, prepared to defend the affrighted herd.

There was a moment of wild confusion. The tramping and snorting of terrified steeds, the sharp crack of rifles, twang of bow-strings, and rattling fusilade of revolvers, mingled with dying yell, and shriek of death-struck steeds. Then, thundering over the sward, flew the Apache herd in wild stampede toward the north, crushing the bodies of their recent masters, as they were shot from their saddles into the grass beneath the fast flying hoofs.

"Git, pards! Git fer timber, er we're gone coons!"

Eastward they dashed, between the scattered post-oaks and mottes, and soon gained the dense shades, as wild yells of mad rage ran through the creek bottom, from the Apaches who had discovered their loss.

From their covert, the trio of prairie pards watched the Apache horsemen speeding, like leaves before a gale, after the stampeded herd; while others galloped here and there, filled with amazement and fury, searching for those who had escaped them in such an unlooked-for manner, and then daringly charged into the herd, scattering it to the four winds, besides slaying the braves who kept it.

"Wa-al, dog-gone my half-sister's black cat!" exclaimed Old Rocky, as he drew his cotton kerchief from under his arm, and wiped the perspiration from his brow. Then, as he began to reload his weapon, "thet war a purty fine played game. I war kinder feared we mought slip up on gitten ter kiver, an' ther pesky reds 'ud freeze ther peepers onter us; but we made

tner rifle, pards, an' gin'em a lively teetle cir-kuss. They'll chaw the'r tongues with ole he mad till they gits ther nags herded, an' that'll gin us time ter meander toward ther Houdo. Pard," continued the old scout, addressing himself to Shooting Star, "yer kept yer name up this trip, er I'm a Greaser. I waded in liv'ly myself, but yer had plugged three times inter red meat, while I an' ther Tonk' war takin' t'other three in outen ther wet. Ther durn scarifiers fell from ther critters like es ef a double barrel'd streak o' lightnin' hed fell in love with 'em. What's ther difficult wi' yer, Tonk'? Yer looks es tho' yer hed swallered a cat-fish, 'thout cuttin' ther horns off."

"Rattlesnake feel heap bad," said the Indian.

"You are not wounded?" said Shooting Star anxiously.

"Rattlesnake's belt is empty. His scalping-knife has not drunk Apache blood."

"Don't yer mind that, Tonk'. We-uns couldn't stop fer ha'r this trip; but, ef I'm not muchly mistook, yer'll hev chances ter take more sculps than yer keers fer, er lose yer own, afore many suns shines. Ther 'Paches is plum full o' mad at bein' sarcumvented, when they thought they hed the dead wood outen us. They'll start a small party toward ther Pecos, wi' ther loose stock, an then come jist a-bi'llin' down Frio-way—bet yer sculp on thet! They knows we-uns ain't blamed fools enough ter skute up crick, so they'll sarcumvent east'ard 'thout tryin' ter hunt fer our trail. Ther fingers is itchin' ter git a bolt on our ha'r, an' they'll try the'r bottom best ter do hit."

"They have all they can attend to, I judge, for this night," said Shooting Star. "The herd are so terrified, that they will not be able to head the animals, and collect the scattering nags before morning."

"Wa-al, I reckon ye're 'bout kerrect, pard. We-uns needn't fret our gizzards much afore ter-morrer. 'Pears ter me we'd better skute down crick for a couple o' hours an' then bolt up fer a rest an' feed. We kin keep ahead o' ther varmints easy enough, an' still be ready fer a long run, er a tough fight 'thout hurtin' ther nags too much. What does yer say, pard? I don't ax ther Tonk', kase I knows he'll pint whichever way we-uns skutes."

"I think your advice is good, ole pard; for our horses, as you say, must not be deprived of rest and feed, especially when we are sure of hot work ahead. We can cover half the distance between us and the train, then encamp with security in the thick bottom timber, where our horses can feed in the small openings without being discovered from the plain, should the reds steal a march on us, and that is very doubtful at present. We had better cross the stream and gallop down on the south side of the timber, had we not?"

"Yer hes struck ther bull's-eye es usual, pard. Come on, fer I wants ter git whar I kin laugh, er I shall bu'st, sartain sure, fer hit's ther best job I ever see'd did. Pullin' ha'r over 'Pache's eyes, when ther cusses war jist gittin' ready ter tangle ther greasy fingers inter we-uns' beautiful top-knots!"

Shaking with suppressed mirth, the old scout spurred through the bottom, followed by Shooting Star and Rattlesnake, the latter silent and grim, and evidently regretting deeply the necessity of leaving six Apache scalps behind him.

Upon clearing the timber the trio galloped down toward the Houdo at a lively rate of speed, neither speaking a word, but at all times glancing back on their trail, without, however, observing any Indians in pursuit. For an hour they thus continued at a gallop, and then proceeded at a fast walk for some miles further, until at last Old Rocky turned abruptly into the heavy timber.

"Hyer we is, pards. This 'll jist fit us ter a dot. Ther's a open 'bout a shoot inside o' ther bush whar I camped when I war mustangin' a year ago. Foller clost an' look out fer ther whiskin' branches."

Following a winding path made by mustangs for some distance, the old scout led his comrades, as he had promised, into a cosey opening of some two acres in extent, covered with rich, luxuriant grass and flowers, and entirely surrounded by towering trees.

"Yer mought sot fourteen hundred and forty fires a-blazin' inside here, an' yer couldn't git a squint of 'em a shoot off," said the old scout, as he slipped from his saddle and began removing his horse equipments.

"We-uns is es safe hyer-a-ways es ef we was a-settin' on ther ruff o' ther Alamo, an' I'm dog-goned glad ter git a show ter stretch my legs, 'sides chawin' grub, with a chance ter snatch a few winks o' snooze. Dog-gone my half-sister's black cat! I'm es full o' real ole he laugh as a perrarer dog's hole arc o' snakes!"

"Where did you pick up that peculiar expression in regard to your distant relative's ebony feline, which I've heard you make use of so often?" asked Shooting Star, as he threw his saddle upon the sward, tore some rank grass from the sod, and began to rub down his sweating horse.

"'Pears ter me ye're a-slingin' some dang'd peculiar 'spressions at me. Yer lingo are a teetle too highferlutin', er else I hes got bugs in

my ears. I doesn't understand no langwidge 'ceptin' 'Nited States."

"I mean about your half-sister's black cat!" explained the young scout.

"O-ho! That's what ye was tryin' ter git through yer teeth, war hit? Wa-al, I used ter meander 'round with a reg'lar ole rawhide ripper of a scout, what are knowed es Big Yumc, an' ther cuss war alwis a-gittin' off thet 'sposion ef he war 'tall excited, no matter what hit war 'bout. Ef he war mad, er glad, er anything come over him suddint-like, he'd rip hit out, till I got hit by heart. I reckons I'll be spittin' out them very same words when I gives my last yell and flops over to make a die on hit. Pards, thet big Yuma war the wustest pill in the box ter git along with when he war 'bout half full o' tarranteler juice. He'd go off at half-cock every time, an' wouldn't 'low nary pilgrim ter gaze at him crossways. I've see'd him tackle outen half a dozen boss fighters what war sp'illin' fer a muss 'fore he chipped in, an' drag 'em out an' mop ther streets o' Santa Fee with 'em. Hit used ter make ther corriners laugh cl'ar down in thar boots when they see'd him lope into ary town; but they kept es clost es a tick in a mule's ear till he levanted. Then they'd start biz an' sot on ther corpses. But I've gabbed myself dry es a ole rawhide, so I'll skute through ther crick ter fill ther canteens, while you young-uns starts a fire. This drink what's in 'em may do ter make coffee, I reckon, pard, so I'll pour hit inter the pot."

Old Rocky soon returned with water, and found a bright fire burning; while the savory odor of broiling bacon and dried beef, together with the fragrant aroma of boiling coffee, filled the air.

With a glance of extreme satisfaction, the old scout seated himself between his two pards, and all proceeded to devour the edibles, with appetites born of open air and exercise—Nature's great tonic—after which they staked their horses on fresh grass, and filled their pipes for a smoke.

"Hit 'pears ter me, Shootin' Star, thet this air a right handy time ter swing us somethin' 'bout what yer hes ter do with ther train folks what Rattlesnake see'd; thet is, ef yer feels like hit."

"Nothing would give me more pleasure, old pard."

"Wa-al, Tonk', I reckon yer'd better kick out thet fire, an' then we'll be on ther safe side, an' then yer kin snatch a wink o' snooze ef yer keers ter; fer I reckon yer wouldn't comper-keend half what our pard's got ter say, bein's yer hain't educated inter fu'st-class XXX 'Nited States lingo."

The Tonkaway did as his friend suggested; extinguishing the fire, and lying down on the sward at some distance from the scouts.

Old Rocky reclined against his saddle, and bent toward Shooting Star, the moon shining into the middle of the opening sufficiently clear to allow them, though in the shade of the timber, to see each other quite plainly; the precaution having been taken also, to stake the horses in the shade, beneath the heavy branches of the surrounding trees.

"Everythin's all hunk, pard; so, shoot off yer tongue. Hit'll ease yer in'ards ter tell ther ole man yer troubles; fer when we keeps 'em corraled inside, they's liable ter frictionize an' 'splode in red-hot words, when an' whar we doesn't want 'em aired. 'Sides that they's mighty apt ter make us grow old 'fore our time comes."

CHAPTER IV.

SHOOTING STAR'S STORY.

"WELL, old pard, to start with, I will say that you are the first white man in my wandering life, who has ever merited my confidence."

"I have, for some time, distrusted and shunned so-called civilization, and mankind in general; and with good cause, for I have been greatly wronged. There are but two human beings among all whom I have known in the last two years, whom I have felt like calling my friends. These two are yourself and this Tonkaway, and I would stake my life on the true manhood and honesty of either of you."

"Put her right thar, pard," said Old Rocky, extending his hand; "I kin tell a squar' man by ther look of his eye, an' I tuck yer fer thet from ther fust off. I doesn't mix fingers with everybody, as yer knows, an' I feels proud ter hear yer say yer hes read me, an' sot me down s lid. Yer'll find me kerrect clean through ther biz. Perceed."

"Well, Old Rocky, how long is it since we first became acquainted?"

"Jist 'bout twelve moons. I ain't dead sure, but hit's nigh on ter that."

"Yes, you are right. It is about a year since our trails met, and we camped together for the first time. It was on Pecan Bayou. Do you think I have changed much since then?"

"Wa-al, I should say yer is; fer thet time yer war wild es any 'Pache what over wore paint."

"Right again, old pard! I think I must have been on the borders of insanity for near a twelvemonth; and, although I did not attempt to take my own life, I sought and braved dan-

ger and death in every form, earnestly hoping that some friendly bullet or arrow would end my misery. But, to my story.

"I have told you that I am from Eastern Texas; and that is the limit of the information that I have given to any man in regard to myself. My home is, or was, on the Rio Brazos; and I presume that my father still resides on the old plantation. He is quite wealthy, owning large tracts of cotton lands and many slaves. When about fourteen years of age I was sent to Louisiana, to boarding-school; and, at seventeen, was summoned home to the death-bed of my mother, who lived only long enough after my arrival to give me her last blessing. Her death was a severe blow to me, for I am an only child, and had been humored and petted from my earliest recollection. My father, who had intended sending me to college, now gave up the idea. He was so prostrated with grief, when my mother was taken from us, that he could not bear the thought of being separated from me. I was very much pleased with his decision, for I did not take kindly to books, and was delighted with the prospect of assisting my father in his many duties connected with the plantation.

"For six months or so after my mother's death, nothing occurred to break the regular routine of our lives; but, at the end of that time, I received an invitation to a shooting match which had been gotten up by the sons of some neighboring planters, and from that date, my thoughts, aspirations, and whole life became entirely changed.

"I had, during my stay at home, been in the habit of riding over the plantation nearly every day, always carrying my rifle, and constantly practicing with it, as well as with my revolvers. Besides this, I frequently went hunting, and was considered by my father and our slaves, an excellent shot; but I had never mingled with the neighboring families, and consequently those who invited me to the shooting-match, knew nothing of my proficiency in the use of fire-arms. The place selected for meeting, and the trial of skill, was on a beautiful, natural lawn, opposite the elegant residence of Lawrence Libby, a wealthy planter, whose estate was situated on the Colorado River, some thirty miles south from my own home. I had never visited at the Libbys' and was not, at the time, personally acquainted with any of the family. I had often heard, however, many remarks passed in regard to the great beauty of a daughter of the planter, who was himself a Justice of the Peace, and commander of a company of Regulators.

"It was late in the day previous to the match that I mounted my horse and started for the rendezvous, being forced to encamp for the night some five miles below the Libby plantation. This, as I have said, was on the Colorado, my own home being but a short distance from the first big bend the Rio Brazos makes before mingling its waters with those of the Gulf of Mexico.

"In the morning, knowing that I had some hours' leisure before the shooting would begin, I proceeded up the river, beneath the towering bottom timber. I had traveled about three miles, when, as I rode leisurely along, a piercing shriek cut the air, sounding from the more dense timber nearer the river. From the sound, and from the cries for help that followed, I judged that it was a woman and that she must be in some deadly peril. Springing from my horse, I ran toward the point whence the sounds proceeded; rushing at headlong speed, knowing that the drooping vines would impede my way if I were mounted.

"I cannot express by words the intense horror that I experienced in the next few fleeting moments, which really seemed an age to me; for, as I broke from a dense thicket into a portion of the bottom that was partially clear, I saw, not fifty yards from my position, a most lovely girl dressed in spotless white, her face ghastly with terror and bent upward as in some horrible fascination. Guided by her gaze, I saw a most appalling sight. Not twenty feet from where the angelic maiden stood frozen by fear was a huge panther, its form outstretched upon a limb, tearing the bark with its claws, and, at the very moment I caught sight of it, gathering its muscular frame catlike for the deadly bound upon its prey. I knew the brute would spring on the instant; and, with a lightning-like movement, my rifle was poised, and I pulled trigger. As the report rung through the bottom, I dropped the rifle, and drawing my bowie sprung forward just as the body of the panther darted through the air in the direction of the affrighted girl, who, with a shriek, sunk to the earth.

"I reached the spot as the terrible beast, which had struck the ground a few paces from its intended victim, was rolling over and over in the agonies of death. Springing upon it, I buried my knife in its heart; but, in its spasmodic struggles, the terrible claws of the panther not only tore my clothing and lacerated my arm, but rent the delicate skirt of the senseless girl and bespattered her with its blood. Panting with exertion and excitement, I tenderly lifted the maiden from the ground and

bore her to the river bank, where I bathed her head in the cool waters.

"I cannot, by any words of mine, old pard; give you any idea of the loveliness of the girl I had saved from so terrible a death. She was not more than fifteen years of age, a perfect Venus in form and feature, with long golden, wavy hair, that hung unrestrained by comb or ribbon. Her complexion was dazzling as the polished lining of a shell, and her unclosed lips revealed teeth of pearly whiteness. I have said, however, that I cannot describe her beauty, and I will not attempt it.

"It was not long before her lids trembled, and a shudder convulsed her frame; then her eyes opened quickly, and she looked into my face for a moment in seeming amazement. I suppose that I blushed like a school-boy, and was quite awkward when I arose from the bank and placed her upon her feet. Certain it is that I was never so embarrassed in my life before. Suddenly she remembered the fearful danger through which she had passed; and with a look of terror, she sprung to my side and clung wildly to me, her gaze turned toward the spot where she had stood when the panther had been about to spring upon her. I led her to the side of the terrible beast, now harmless in death; and I will not tell you how profuse were her thanks, or how from the depths of her melting blue eyes glances were shot that pierced my heart of hearts, while her words seemed to transport me into a hitherto unknown and undreamed-of heaven of love. She told me that her name was Laura Libby; that we were but two miles from her home, where the shooting-match was to come off.

"She had ridden down the Colorado in search of flowers, and had dismounted to gather some delicate creepers near the water's edge, when the panther frightened her pony away, thus preventing her escape. Well, old pard, I caught her horse and we both rode out from the bottom-timber into the lawn opposite her home; and during that ride of two miles, I was in a seventh heaven of delight. The birds sung sweeter than ever before, but not so sweet as the music of her voice. The waters rippled more joyously than I had ever heard them, but they were not to be compared to her merry laughter.

"When we entered, we found congregated a large number of people, as it was now near the hour when the shooting had been announced to commence; and I must have blushed the color of a red peony, when I saw that the whole assemblage was gazing at us. The parents of Laura hastened to her side, and when she had told her story, they were filled with extreme concern and horror at the thought of the peril through which she had passed. They overwhelmed me with their expressions of gratitude, and soon every one began to collect about us. Soon my wounds were dressed, and I was the hero of the hour; but before night I was doubly so, for I won every prize that was shot for during that day, much to the surprise of everybody, and the disgust and envy of not a few.

"Among the young men present was Duke Darrow, the son of a neighboring planter, who was—so I understood, by the remarks which I heard on every side during the match—a suitor for the hand of Laura Libby. A young man, with whom I became quite friendly, gave me some information in regard to this Darrow, which, although I did not give a second thought in regard to it at the time, I had good cause to remember afterward. He had the reputation of being very vindictive and quarrelsome, as well as intemperate and addicted to gambling. However, as his father was wealthy, I was given to understand that Colonel Libby and his wife were not averse to his wooing their daughter. I was cautioned to beware of him, as there would be bloodshed, if he began to suspect me of entertaining a warm regard for Laura, or knew of my being on familiar terms with her. This I paid no attention to, neither did I notice the devilish glances he cast at me from his black eyes, when I was receiving the thanks of our host and hostess, for saving their child; or when I shot the bull's-eye from the target, and won the prizes, many of which he had, on previous occasions, been wont to carry away.

"I left for home, after a tender leave-taking from Laura who, much to my joy, expressed a wish that I should visit them again; and thus, the love that had been born in my heart at first sight of her angelic face, was doubled and deeply rooted for life. On my return, I took the skin from the panther, and gave the beast burial; ay, almost blessed him for being the means of changing my heretofore uneventful life into a summer's dream—a dream, alas! that was to be changed into a horrid nightmare.

"Weeks and months passed, during which I often visited the Libby plantation, and at last knew, from Laura's own lips, that she loved me as I loved her. During this time, I frequently heard of the dark threats of Duke Darrow, as he was called, who had now become aware of my success. But I gave neither him nor his words a second thought. It chanced, however, that a merchant, who had for years purchased

our cotton crop, arrived at our plantation, and paid my father a large sum of money in gold, which I was forced to carry for safety to the bank in a neighboring town. For this purpose, I started at an hour that would enable me to reach the Libby plantation by nightfall, for I was anxious for an interview with Laura, whom I had not seen for a long week. Would that I could have been forewarned of the dread consequences of my visit! It was just at twilight that I passed the spot where I had first met my fate, and I glanced at the limb upon which the panther had crouched, with a shudder running through my frame. I then rode on toward the Libby plantation.

"I had gone about two-thirds of the distance, still being in the bottom timber, when suddenly all became blank to me. I had been shot; the bullet, however, only glancing along my temple, and stunning me for a time. How long I lay unconscious, I do not know. When I regained my senses, I sat up greatly bewildered and troubled, for it was now moonlight, and my horse was nowhere to be seen. As the thought of the large amount of money in my saddle-bags, entered my mind, I sprung to my feet, and great was my surprise to discover the body of a man stretched upon the sward within five paces of me, an arrow of moonlight shooting through the branches upon his ghastly features. A second glance, and I recognized Colonel Libby, the father of Laura, and saw the hilt of a bowie-knife projecting from his breast, while his right hand clutched a revolver.

"For a moment I stood, dazed with horror. Then the sound of people approaching through the bottom, and the flutter of white garments, with the confused murmur of many voices, reached me. Among the last, I recognized that of Darrow, who spoke my name several times. Instantly the thought flashed through my mind that I was the victim of an infernal plot planned by my rival. I remembered his oft-repeated threats, and staggering into a dense thicket, I awaited breathlessly the approach of the crowd. How I lived through the next few minutes of mental agony, I do not know.

"In front of the party ran Laura, with such an expression of agonized apprehension on her pale face that I covered my eyes with my hands to shut out the sight; but the piercing shriek of intense anguish and horror that followed tore my heart, and I looked again to see her throw herself upon her father's corpse.

"Search the body! I heard Darrow cry out; and the next moment a man drew out the bowie from the breast of Colonel Libby, exclaiming, as he did so, 'This is Charley Audley's knife. His name is on the handle!'

"The very blood congealed in my veins as I heard these words, for I remembered having lost my bowie-knife a few days before. I could see through the whole plot now. Duke Darrow had watched my movements; he knew of the visit of the cotton merchant and of my starting with the gold, and he also felt sure that I would call on Laura on my way. He had galloped ahead of me, secreted himself, and waited for my appearance; but Colonel Libby had come upon the scene by accident, and seeing me approaching, and at the same time a skulking man lying in wait, had fired at him, the ball flying wild and stunning me. Darrow had doubtless, with insane fury, sprung from his covert, and buried the knife in the colonel's heart, before he knew who it was that had discovered his dastardly attempt at my life. Then, finding me senseless, he had, with fiendish cunning, arranged to fix the whole affair upon me, while he escaped the consequences of his crime. I knew that the wretch had been losing heavily at cards for some time previous to this, and that he had been refused money by his own father. This caused me to think that he had intended to assassinate me and rob my saddle-bags, which crime would probably have been laid at the door of a gang of desperadoes who infested this section at the time. But the fiend whom he served had put it in his power to avenge himself upon me in a way more satisfactory to himself.

"These thoughts flashed through my fevered brain, as I heard the crowd clamoring for my life.

"Hang him! Let loose the blood-hounds! String up the assassin!" Such cries rung through the bottom; and, with a hopeless despair tearing at my heart-strings, and my brain filled with the most insane thoughts, I crawled on my hands and knees from thicket to thicket, realizing that there was no mercy in the yelling mob that was now beating the bushes, no hope in life for me—nothing but a life of misery in the future! I was a murderer in the sight of the world. I must banish myself from my home forever!

"Luckily, I found my horse, but my saddle-bags were gone; and mounting, I forded the Colorado, and then galloped wildly toward the Rio Grande. On I went, spurring and lashing my horse like a madman, until the poor animal dropped dead on the prairie; then I lost consciousness. It was days, probably, before I regained my reason, and then I found myself in a lone hut on the Rio Nueces, where I had been

tenderly cared for by a Mexican woman. I happened to have a few rolls of gold in my pockets, and after rewarding my kind nurse, I went up the river to the nearest ranch, procured an outfit, and wandered aimlessly until I discovered the Apache camp. There it was that I saw Rattlesnake tied to the stake for torture. I charged madly through the braves and cut him loose. Then I stood the red devils off until he secured a horse. We escaped, scouting about the country here and there until we first met you on the Pecan Bayou. Now, you know, old pard, that I have had enough of trouble to drive many a man insane."

"Wa-al, I should opine yer bed. But hain't yer heerd nuthin' from East Texas since yer skuted."

"I read in the *San Antonio Herald*, an account of the murder of Col. Libby by myself. The case was stronger against me than even I had feared. I have told you my idea of the plot, but it was different."

"How war hit?"

"The colonel's pistol had not been discharged."

"Then ther cuss Darrow hed shot at yer hisself afore he killed ther kurnil?"

"Yes; and supposed he had killed me. But when he saw there was a witness against him, having ascertained that I was not dead, he conceived the devilish plot which he carried out."

"An' yer daddy? Hain't yer heerd from him?"

"I wrote him the whole account of the affair. Of course, he dare not reply to me; but I know he will believe me, though I can convince no one else."

"An' ther leetle gal? How 'bout her?"

"At times I have been filled with hopes of one day claiming her as my wife; but, at others I have despaired. A year ago, I heard that Duke Darrow had forged his father's name for a large amount, and run away, and was now a road agent. I feel that I shall yet wring a confession from him. Murder will out, old pard; and I believe the day will come when I can walk into my father's house with proofs of my innocence."

"I hopes hit will, pard; an' byer's ther man what'll do all he kin to fotch hit round. But what did ther Tonk' pick up et ther train ter make yer change so ter-day?"

"He brought me a lock of hair, which he says a young and beautiful girl told him to bring me. The train passed through San Antonio, and she saw Rattlesnake and myself ride across the Plaza. Afterward she saw the Tonkaway, and told him to give this to the young chief he was riding with. It must have been Laura. The hair is like hers. I know no other young lady. But what brings Laura Libby to this wild frontier, I cannot imagine."

"Hit's a peculiar case, I'm danged ef it ain't. But we'll soon find out all 'bout hit, pard; so don't fret."

At this instant both the scouts clutched their rifles, and sprung to their feet in alarm, Old Rocky exclaiming:

"Dog-gone my half-sister's black cat!"

For just in front of them, and not fifty paces away, Rattlesnake was in a death-struggle with an Apache brave.

CHAPTER V.

THE RECOGNITION.

It was about the same time that Shooting Star met with his red pard in the Bandera Hills that a beautiful girl, mounted upon a black pony, every movement of which was as graceful as a fawn, cantered over the prairie within a short distance of the bottom timber of the Rio Hondo. She could not have been more than seventeen years of age, and her long hair flowed free in the breeze and glittered like threads of gold. Her eyes were of delicate blue, her face fair and pink as the prairie flowers that decked her wide-brimmed hat of straw. She was clad in a tasteful, close-fitting habit, and her gaze was fastened upon the white tilts of four wagons which slowly moved along the line of timber a mile or so in advance of her.

As the sun sunk lower and lower, and the western sky became of a fiery hue, she brought her restive pony to a halt, and looked with admiration, not unmixed with awe, upon the beautiful scene. When next she glanced along the line of timber the white wagon-tops had vanished from view.

With an ejaculation of surprise and alarm the maiden gave her pony a vigorous cut with her riding-whip, and the animal sprung at a gallop up the stream toward the point where she had last seen the train.

But a few bounds did the pony make, however, when from out the bottom timber dashed half a dozen Apache braves, hideously daubed with war-paint, and lashing their wild and sporting steeds as they sought to intercept the fair girl, who, with a piercing cry of horror, strove to urge her pony away from the red demons, who, in a few moments, had formed a horrible circle around her. Gradually this had converged, and she was soon brought to a halt, closely encircled by the wild steeds and their wilder riders.

Pale as death, and trembling in every limb with excitement and terror, yet still retaining a thought of self-defense, as a fate many times worse than death seemed inevitable, she quickly drew a revolver from her belt and fired directly at the warrior in front of her; but the brave, detecting her object, gave a sudden jerk upon the jaw-strap of his mustang, the animal threw up its head, and the bullet was lodged in its brain.

The horse fell to earth, but before the fair girl could again cock her pistol the weapon was snatched from her hand, and the next instant an Apache brave on either side grasped the reins of her pony and lashed the animal toward the timber, close followed by the others. The warrior who had been dismounted brought up the rear, his ugly features filled with insane fury. In ten minutes from the time that the beautiful girl had gazed so admiringly upon the sunset view she was being hurried through the dark shades of the Hondo, dazed with horror, dread, and hopeless despair, conscious that her friends with the train would not know what had befallen her, for they would not discover the dead horse probably before the morrow, and then, even did they find the trail, and know that she had been captured by the savages, she would then be far away, and beyond all chance of being rescued.

When the Apaches, with their captive, had proceeded some distance into the wood they halted, and the dismounted brave, at an order from one whose eagle-plumes proclaimed him chief, secured the delicate wrists of the terrified maiden to her saddle, and then with no gentle hand bound a wad of buckskin between her quivering lips, thus effectually gagging her. This done, the march was resumed, the braves riding singly in a line, their captive in the middle, and winding snake-like amid the trees and underbrush. Thus silently rode the Apaches, without, as usual, giving vent to their exultation by yells, thus proving that they were aware of the near vicinity of the train. For half a mile they thus proceeded, then plunged into the Rio Hondo, and fording it, advanced still more cautiously and slowly through the timber, up the stream and parallel to it.

After following a mustang trail for some distance, a confused murmur, mingled with shouts, reached the captive's ears, which was the first intimation the poor girl had that she had been carried toward the camp of her friends, so overwhelmed had she been with terror that she knew not in what direction the Apaches had ridden.

A few guttural orders were now given by the chief in a low tone, and all dismounted. The Indian whose mustang had been shot then advanced at a call from the chief, who gave him a few directions, pointing as he did so toward the Bandera Hills. The warrior quickly tightened his belt and sprung up the path, disappearing from view, and seemingly on an urgent mission.

The sun had now sunk in the West, but here and there the rays of the moon filtered through the foliage of the tree-tops in bars and arrows of silver, serving to make the scene more weird and appalling to the golden-haired girl who sat, bound and gagged, on her pony, amid a group of bloodthirsty demons, their sense of hearing strained to the utmost to interpret the sounds that broke the stillness of the night from the camp just over the Hondo.

Sounds they were that only served to tantalize the mind of the captive maiden, unable as she was either to warn her friends of her most terrible condition or their own peril. At last the chief uttered a low signal, and glided from view within the underbrush toward the river, followed by three braves, leaving one on guard.

At this moment the captive forgot for the time her own peril, as the thought was forced upon her that the inhuman butchers were now crawling toward the unsuspecting women and children of the train; for she reasoned, and rightly, that the men of the party must now be nearly all scouring the prairie in search of her. She now saw that her capture was a well contrived plan of the savages, who, being so few in numbers, did not dare attack the train or camp until they had, through her, drawn the defenders out on the prairie.

These thoughts nearly drove her insane, for she could easily picture to herself the hideous demons crawling like serpents toward her now defenseless friends. Determined to warn them if her own life paid the forfeit, she bent her head downward, at the same time forcing her body backward, and pressing her mouth against the horn of the saddle, forced the gag from her mouth.

This done, she silently regained her seat unobserved by the Apache, who, with senses on the alert, was looking toward the point where he evidently expected his fellow-braves would soon make themselves heard.

All was now silent. Drawing her lungs full of air, the captive girl gave a prolonged and piercing shriek, that cut the air and rung through the bottom timber like the last despairing cry of a lost soul. Instantly the Apache guard, with a grunt of anger and surprise, sprung to her side, and again gagged her, this

time more tightly than before, and performing a suggestive pantomime about her head with his tomahawk.

Without a thought of herself, however, she listened intently for sounds from beyond the river, which soon came; causing, as they did, the blood in her veins to congeal and her frame to tremble with anguish, for, close following her own cry came the blood-curdling war-whoops of the Apaches, and then the horrified screams of women and children. A few scattering rifle and revolver shots now echoed loudly through the timber, and then far-sounding yells from the prairie. She felt that those who had gone out in search of her were now returning to the assistance of their friends. For a few moments she sat like an equestrian statue, listening to the confused sounds from the camp, but without the faintest hope of rescue. Then a motion in the bushes below her drew her attention, and the four Apaches bounded into the path, their repulsive bodies spattered with blood, as they clutched in gore-stained hands and waved over their heads, the reeking scalps of women and children. Closing her eyes to shut out these horrors, the despairing girl uttered one last earnest prayer, as the Apaches again mounted, and lashed their mustangs up the trail, while from the camp rung vengeful yells and cries of anguish.

On, on, bounded the young girl's pony, led by a brave in front, and lashed by another behind.

And on, winding here and there amid the timber, through thickets and gullies, and dense dark shades in consonance with her own hopeless and despairing condition was she unresistingly borne.

On, for what length of time she knew not, when at last a low signal sounded from the chief in the lead, and the warriors came to a halt.

Mechanically the eyes of the poor girl wandered about, seeing nothing that could give any hope of release. All seemed as still as death around and above, except the occasional hooting of an owl, or the barking of a coyote.

For all this, she knew that the keen ears of the Apache chief had detected danger, even when the movement of bush and branch and steed had served to drown all distant sounds. She was positive of this when she saw the Indians slip silently from their horses, and draw their bows.

Straining every nerve to catch the slightest sound, thinking that perhaps indeed her friends had galloped to her rescue, she gazed toward the point to which the attention of her captors seemed to be directed.

For some moments she could hear nothing. Naught could she see except the same weird forest scene which had met her view during her forced ride; but at last she heard a click as if the hoof of a horse had struck a small stone. Then, after another moment of agonizing suspense, she detected the regular tramp of steeds, apparently proceeding along the bottom, between her position and the river. The attention of her savage captors was now riveted in the direction of these sounds, not appearing to notice her. Soon, much to her joy, a bar of moonlight shone directly down upon her head and face, thus revealing her position should any friendly human being chance to be passing in her direction.

Suddenly her heart sprung to her throat; for, not twenty yards away, she distinctly saw a white man ride through a patch of moonlight, which caused a low grunt of surprise to issue from the throat of the Apache chief. Close following the white man, who appeared aged, was an Indian, and her captors half bent their bows as his face and form were revealed. The strange pair passed from view into the dense shades down the river; and shortly after, the tramp of a horse proved that another night rider was following after the two, and evidently a friend to them, as the sound of his horse's hoofs must be plainly audible to them.

Earnestly the poor girl watched the patch of moonlight, and soon the head of a horse came into view, close followed by the clearly delineated form and face of a young man clad in buckskin, and armed as his comrades had been. One eager gaze, and the eyes of the beautiful captive were filled with the most intense surprise, her form quivered in a superhuman effort to burst the gag and cry out; and, at the same instant, as if her glance had electrified him and drawn his attention, the young night rider cast his eyes toward her moon-illuminated bust, over which in wavy masses hung her wealth of golden hair.

No sooner did the young man catch sight of the angelic picture in so strange a place, than he jerked his horse to its haunches, and stared as if thunder-struck, his eyes filled with awe, as though he felt that what he beheld was something most dear indeed, but not of any earthly origin.

The captive moved her head, and gazed most appealingly, although the next moment she bitterly repented the movement, for she realized that she might be deceiving one whom she loved more than life, to a horrible death.

But an instant did the young man sit his horse in amazement. The next, he drove deep

his spurs, and dashed toward her. Then the twanging of bow-strings sounded in the ears of the horror-stricken girl, followed by the crashing fall of a horse among the bushes.

She heard the hiss of quirts through the air, and knew that her pony was again bounding madly up the trail, urged on by her merciless captors. She felt a deathly overpowering horror creeping over her at the thought that she had thus lured a long loved and lost one to his death, and was now herself being hurried to something a thousand times worse. Then all grew dark. She sunk forward. Her golden hair mingled with the black mane of her pony, and her death-like features rested upon its neck. God had mercifully relieved her overburdened brain for the time—the fair captive was senseless.

CHAPTER VI.

A MAN'S MADNESS.

For a moment only did Shooting Star and Old Rocky stand gazing at the terrible conflict between Rattlesnake and the Apache. Over and over upon the sward, the two Indians rolled; their limbs interlocked, and their muscles strained to the utmost, each striving to get the advantage of the other. Their supple forms writhed like serpents, while their hideously painted faces were contorted with hate and deadly fury.

First one, and then the other would gain the upper position; but the sinewy arms of neither relaxed their desperate gripe sufficiently to allow the use of the scalping-knife, which each held tightly clutched in his right hand. At last, however, the fearful struggle came to an end; and both, for a moment, lay side by side panting upon the ground, staring with intense and murderous hate into each other's eyes. Then Rattlesnake, gathering all his strength, suddenly sprung upright, jerking his enemy to his feet at the same time, and bending his right wrist quickly, caused the blade of his knife to cut deep into the muscles of the Apache's arm. Only an instant did the gripe of the latter relax; but, in that brief space, Rattlesnake, with the quickness of thought, whirled his hand in a circle, and then buried the blade to the hilt in his adversary's breast.

For a moment the filmy eyes of the brave gazed into the exultant face of his foe, and then Rattlesnake jerked his knife from the Apache's breast, and the hot life-blood spurted over the grass and flowers of the opening. Quivering and swaying in his tracks he stood for an instant, then his arms flew upward, his gaze became fixed upon the star-studded heavens, and with a death-cry forced through his trembling lips by his latest breath, he sunk a corpse at the feet of the Tonkaway.

Twining his fingers in the hair of his vanquished enemy, Rattlesnake, with a dexterous movement, circled his blade around the Apache's head, tore off the reeking scalp, and then rising erect and proud, he held the highly-prized trophy on high, while he shot out exultantly the war-cry of his tribe. Then he turned, and faced his white parads.

"Wa-al, dod blast my peculiar pictur!" said the old scout. "Yer hes hed a leetle fandango all ter yerself. How in thunderation did that varmint crawl in this-a-ways, an' whar did he perceed from?"

"That's what I would like to know," said Shooting Star. "We were so busy talking that we had ceased to be watchful, besides I had no idea that any of the war-party would come this way before morning."

Rattlesnake raised his arm, and pointed down the stream. "Come that way," he said.

"Wa-al, dog-gone hit! Yer doesn't mean ter say he come from toward ther Hondo?" broke out Old Rocky, in surprise.

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed the young scout, in astonishment and alarm, as he sprung toward the Tonkaway; "tell us quickly, Rattlesnake, what you think about this. Is this brave not one of the war party who came so near corraling us?"

"No," replied the Tonkaway laconically, as he secured the scalp to his belt, and returned his knife to its sheath.

Both the white men now examined the dead Apache.

"Hit's hard tellin' whar he glided from," decided Old Rocky, "thout follerin' his trail."

Rattlesnake stalked a few paces from the corpse, then sunk on his knees, and by a gesture called the scouts to his side. They knelt down by him. Pointing over the moonlit opening, the Indian spoke:

"Let my white brothers look. The tears of the sky have fallen, and the Apache's trail is open."

Bending low, and glancing over the opening, the scouts saw a well-defined trail; the grass over which the brave had just passed being free from the heavy dew which had been scattered by his feet.

"Apache run fast. Come from Hondo. Go to Bandera Hills for more braves. Mebbe so have fight with train. Big war-party on Guadalupe. Some go Hondo. Some go Medina. Some go Bandera. Have fight. Send runner for more braves."

"Dang my cats! Hit's jist es ther Tonk' puts hit. Fards, we must hustle outen this lively, fer we're needed down kintry, bet yer sculps! This busts up our see-esty, an' I war countin' on a reg'lar ole he snooze. But I reckon we kin keep our peepers open ef white folks is needin' our pertect!"

"Heaven help these poor women and children!" said Shooting Star, as he sprung for his horse. "I have felt the most torturing anxiety and concern ever since I met Rattlesnake at the Bandera Hills, and he gave me that look of hair. It has seemed to me all the time that I am needed by the one who is so dear to me; unreasonable as it looks to assume that Laura Libby can be in that train. Still, I can account for it in no other way."

In a very short time the three prairie pards were galloping at headlong speed toward the east, having satisfied themselves by an inspection of the adjoining opening, that the Apache runner had really come from that direction.

Neck and neck, they galloped along the edge of the timber which marked the course of the stream; not a word being spoken, while the eyes of all were casting keen glances over the moonlit prairie.

At length Old Rocky led the way into the timber, their horses being much fagged, and they had to proceed more slowly, one after the other, following a winding mustang path. Shooting Star's horse limped along listlessly, and noticing this, he allowed it to fall behind. It was at this time, his friends being too intent upon watching their course to notice him, that he was suddenly filled with the utmost amazement, on beholding at some distance to his right, within a patch of moonlight, the unearthly picture of the one who, at that very moment ruled all his thoughts. Halting, at the first glance, believing it to be but an optical delusion conjured up by his own troubled brain, he next noticed a movement of the gold-crowned head, and then saw that a band of some kind was drawn tightly across the mouth. This convinced him that the real living form of the one he loved better than life, was before him; and in deadly danger. Electric-like the thought flew through his mind. The information which he had received from the Tonkaway, meager though it was, became now a living reality to him. Not only this, but he knew on the instant that the Apache runner who had been slain by Rattlesnake, had come from the Houdo, where he had left those of his kind, ripe for murder.

That the train had been attacked he now felt sure, and also that Laura was now a captive, being borne away by the red fiends, who now, doubtless, were lurking in the shades about her form. He was conscious that if he raised a cry of alarm to notify his pards, the helpless girl would be ruthlessly butchered; and yet he was unable to hold himself back from attempting her rescue.

For a single instant these thoughts flashed through his brain; the next he drove deep his spurs, and sprung madly toward the lovely maiden upon whose face was now stamped a pleading look, agonizing for him to witness—he who had loved the ground she trod, and the air she breathed, with an intensity which time could not change!

A few gigantic bounds his spur-maddened steed made toward that appealing face; then, a few feathered shafts cut the air, and rearing upward, with a groan of anguish that was almost human, the young scout's mustang fell with a crash into the underbrush, struggling in the agonies of death.

Filled with desperation, frantic with torture and despair almost unendurable, Shooting Star disentangled himself from his dying horse, and bearing the tramp of the retreating steeds, he rushed madly after them, totally forgetting his companions, and only conscious that the one being who was all in all to him—she who could make his earth a heaven—was being carried off to a fate ten thousand times worse than death by the merciless Apaches.

CHAPTER VII.

RATTLESNAKE'S DISCOVERY.

BELIEVING that Shooting Star had been killed, the Apaches sped up the Rio Houdo, one of the braves leaping from his own pony to that of the captive, and supporting her senseless form. They had recognized, in the moonlight, the forms of Old Rocky and the Tonkaway, and both of them being greatly feared by the warriors of the Rio Pecos, they continued their retreat at a gallop, leaving the timber and proceeding along its edge toward the Bandera Hills.

This change enabled the Indians to go with greater speed than in the bottom timber, and the young scout, although he sprung madly along the mustang path in pursuit, was only in time to see the Apaches a quarter of a mile away, speeding like the wind; and her he so fondly loved, and from whom he had been so long parted, clasped in the arms of a burly brave. Knowing by this, and the saddled pony in the lead, that Laura was senseless, the young man became doubly desperate, and in place of returning on the trail for his pards, and borrowing the horse of Rattlesnake—as he would

have done had his judgment not been blunted by his terrible anguish and anxiety—he dashed onward in swift pursuit, though he well knew it would be impossible for him to keep within sight of the murderous abductors.

As he ran along the line of timber, keeping well in the shade to avoid observation should the Apaches look behind them, he reasoned that the braves he was in pursuit of were intending to join those from whom he and his pards had so narrowly escaped in the Bandera Hills. This being the case, if they followed the course of the Houdo, he could take advantage of the lay of the land, and reach the hills by a much easier and shorter route than by following their trail.

No sooner did these reasonings enter his mind, than Shooting Star gave one farewell glance toward the golden hair of Laura Libby, that now flew wildly over the shoulder of the Apache brave, and plunging into the timber, crossed the river, and taking to the north side of the stream, darted over the prairie in a beeline for the Bandera Hills.

Old Rocky had not gone far from the spot where they had unknowingly passed the Apaches, when he pulled rein, and waiting until his red pard had reached his side, asked, as he gazed along the back trail:

"Whar's Shootin' Star?"

The Indian answered not a word, but glanced backward, and seeing that their friend was not in view, showed as much surprise as one of his race generally does. Then he sprung from his horse and bent his ear to the earth.

For a moment only did Rattlesnake keep this position, then, with an exclamation of surprise and concern bursting from his throat, he bounded into his saddle and dashed at full gallop on the back trail without a word of explanation.

"Waal, dog-gone my half sister's black cat!" muttered the old scout, with no little vexation; "I doesn't keer 'bout mixin' wi' folks what hes too much gab, but hit's jist es provokin' when they won't 'low yer ter know what's meanderin' in thar brain-boxes. Hit 'pears the Shootin' Star are gittin' lunny since ther Tonk' tole him 'bout ther gal from ther Colorado, an' I's feared he's skipped ther trail. Reckon I'll skute back a bit an' vestergate ther posish o' things, though I hates mightily ter double on my trail—hit's bad luck."

Old Rocky turned his horse about and proceeded to follow the Tonkaway at a leisurely gait, which showed he had no idea that the young scout had met with any serious accident. In a very short time he came to the spot where the horse of Shooting Star lay dead in the thicket, but the old scout would not have known that the animal was there, had not the keen-eyed Tonkaway discovered the beast. The latter would also have passed the spot without examination, had he not observed the deep indentation of hoofs, just where the moon lit up the trail, at the spot where Shooting Star had jerked his mustang to its haunches, when the strange, weird picture first caught his eye.

As the old scout rode up, the Indian had dismounted and was examining the dead horse, but he quickly sprung through the bushes into the path where the Apaches had made halt with their captive, guided thither by the arrows that projected from the slain animal.

"Dog-gone my cats, ef Shootin' Star hain't bin hev'n a fandango all ter hisself! Rattlesnake, yer was kerrect, as usual. Ther pesky red heathen hes struck ther train an' slashed ha'r, sure es yer is borned. What does yer make outen ther sign out thar-a-ways?"

As Old Rocky asked this question, he tore through the brush toward his red pard. Upon reaching the mustang-path, the old scout saw the Indian standing directly within the opening where Laura Libby had been observed by Shooting Star. He stood with one hand held between his eyes and the moon; and Old Rocky, puzzled by the position of the Indian, approached him.

"What yer foun', Tonk'?"

The Indian grasped the shoulder of the old scout, and drew him to his side; then he pointed to the branches of the tree before them in the moonlight.

"Waal, ef I ain't scientiffkerkitly salervated?"

Rattlesnake sprung upward, grasped the bough, and bending it down before the face of the scout, gathered several golden hairs from it with a look and movement that showed somewhat of reverence, and then thrust them beneath his fillet to wave with his own raven locks. This done, he pointed to the earth at his feet.

"Let my white brother look. The white squaw from the big water has been here. The Apaches have taken her. The trail leads to the hills of Bandera. We were blind, but the eyes of Shooting Star saw the squaw whose hair has been kissed by the sun. He has gone on the trail alone. He has no horse, but Rattlesnake must ride fast to the hills, or his white brother will lose his scalp. Shooting Star will be a fool. He will see his squaw, and shout his war-cry, and fight Apaches alone. Shooting Star must not go to the torture-stake, Rattlesnake has spoken."

"Waal, I'm a dod-blasted good notion ter swar right out!" exclaimed Old Rocky, as he rose from examining the hoof-prints and found himself alone. "Ef hit war on any other kind o' trail, I'd git hoppin' mad; but he's wild es a yaller hornit when he thinks Shootin' Star is in danger. Howsomever, I'm thinkin' by the look of things, thet ef he war needed, hit's 'bout now, for ther youngster are liable ter make a boss fool o' hisself, an' charge flat-footed inter ther hull 'Pache lay-out, arter that gal. I doesn't see why kalike-kivered humans can't keep 'way from ther perrarers until we-uns cleans out the scarifyers. I doesn't know 'actly what ter do, but hit 'pears ter me I'd better skute fer ther camp o' ther train-folks, an' git a hoss fer Shootin' Star. Then I mought glide up-crick speedy, fer ther danged perrarer piruts hes gut fitin' mad, an' mought torter ther gal, fore they strikes toward ther Pecos."

As Old Rocky brought his soliloquy to an end, he hastened back to the dead horse, unloosed the equipments and secured them to his own saddle; then mounting, he sat for an instant in deep perplexity, but soon continued:

"Dang hit! I kin confistercate a hoss from ther 'Paches. Ef I skutes fer ther train, these reds may brile Shootin' Star an' ther Tonk', both on 'em, fore I gits back ter ther hills. I swan ter Cristy, I'll strike fer Bandera ag'in. Hit's a pecul'ar fix; us three pards parted, an' all headed on ther same trail. Ef we kin git tergether jist onc't we'll stand a show ter resky thet gal. Git, old hoss! Thar's heavy biz up ther crick," and the old scout urged his mustang on the back trail, to brave death for his prairie pards.

CHAPTER VIII.

APACHE CAMP.

BETWEEN the creek-bottom and the hills where the Apaches had crouched when they were so cunningly outwitted by Old Rocky, here and there among the oak mottes blazed a dozen camp-fires around which were gathered about two-score of feather and scalp-bedizened Apaches, their war-paint showing plainly in the moonlight, but more vividly and horridly in the flashes of the flames, as they stalked from fire to fire. It was plainly evident that they feared no attack from any force of sufficient strength to cope successfully with them; but the reader must understand that the camp-fires were completely hidden by the bottom timber and the mottes, on the south, east and west, and by the hills upon the north. Upon these, as well as in the towering timber, keen-eyed sentinels were posted. Close in a bend of the creek, guarded by two mounted Indians, were more than a hundred hardy mustangs, tearing up the long, rich grass, showing that the stampede had been checked, and the animals driven in from the plain. Near the middle of the camp, and stretched upon the sward, were the six braves who had been killed by the scouts at the stampede, their arms by their sides, and their scalps still upon their heads, which gave them the full right of being buried after the manner of their tribe, and passed them beyond doubt, according to Apache belief, into the happy hunting-grounds, where waters ever run, grass is ever green, game is plentiful, and horses as fleet as the wind.

At this time, those branches of the Apache tribe whose hunting-grounds joined those of the Comanches, had adopted many of the rites and ceremonies of their northern neighbors, among which was the slaying of the war-horse at the death of his master.

The death-dance was now over, and the mangled remains were about to be consigned to mother earth; and, at a signal from one of the chiefs, six horses fully equipped were led from a motte toward the dead, the warriors from each camp-fire falling into line behind the steeds.

When the corpses were reached a series of most unearthly howls burst from the throats of the assembled braves, as the dead were lifted from the ground, and bound in as natural a position as possible upon the saddles, the wild steeds snorting at the smell of human blood and at the strangely poised loads upon their backs. Fully armed and painted for war, mounted upon the steeds they had oft urged into scenes of mad carnage, the dead braves were started upon their last *jornada*, a warrior leading each terrified horse by a firm hold close upon the jaw-strap. Slowly toward the hills the savage cortege proceeded, a wild chant sounding on the night air, and presenting a most unearthly and horrid spectacle. The black, snake-like eyes that had oft shot glances of fury in the fight now stared glassy and vacant from out the bars of vermilion. The steel-like arms that had oft grasped the last arrow from the earth when at a wild gallop, and made a crescent of the bow which a white man could not bend an inch, or hurled the circling lasso over mustang's head or bison's horns, were limp and nerveless now and forever.

The strange funeral procession went on with blood-chilling howls and moans, the warriors gesticulating wildly, while their eyes were bent upon the star-studded sky. Here and there it

wound, between motte and hill, toward a high cliff upon whose sides grew green patches of stunted oaks, and which was entirely shaded from the moon, now rolling on toward the western horizon.

At the base of this cliff the braves led the horses into a dense motte, where climbers and vines almost completely covered the seemingly solid wall of rock. The Apaches appeared to know the secrets of the place, for half-a-dozen braves sprung forward and tore the vines to the right and left, disclosing the entrance to a cavern, its dark arched entrance showing what it was—a natural tomb. Other braves, with arms full of dry limbs, bounded into the dark passage, and in a moment the scene became illuminated. Then, at a signal, the mustangs were, with much difficulty led into the cavern, snorting with terror, as they passed the fire, which turned the dismal cave into a glittering grotto, as the flames played upon the hanging stalactites which seemed studded with myriads of diamonds.

The quivering mustangs were then ranged in a line, their paint-daubed masters adorned with all the paraphernalia of savage war sitting silent and motionless, their sightless eyes reflecting the fire-light, and presenting a sight almost two horrible for mortal man to gaze upon. Then began the chant for the dead. At the same time, six braves, with bows in their hands and arrows fitted, stepped forward within ten paces of the doomed steeds. Quickly the bows were bent, the bow-strings twanged, and the arrows flew through the fire-light, and were buried feather-deep, in each mustang's side, just clear of the shoulder-blade.

Loud above the death chant sounded the human-like screams of the death-struck steeds, as they reared and plunged with their ghastly riders. First one, and then another fell, with groan and long-drawn heavy sigh upon the rock floor, until all lay prostrate, a mingled mass of blood-reeking men and horses, all dead or dying. Then, with prolonged unearthly howls, the Apaches kicked the firebrands right and left, and dashing from the cavern, sprung hither and thither, gathering rocks with which they filled the entrance of the cave. This done, the vines were again drawn back to their old position, hiding from view the Apache tomb.

The warriors, half bent, and with steps as light as the panther when approaching his prey, now stole here and there, carefully placing weather-beaten rocks wherever the sod had been broken, obliterating, as well as they could, all traces of their trail, and leaving nature to complete the work. They then stalked toward their camp, but had not proceeded a pistol-shot when a series of exultant yells sounded from toward the creek, and with answering whoops, all sprung forward in a wild run, past dark motte and over moonlit opening, like hideous demons eager for hellish work. In a very short time the warriors, in a body, darted around the base of the hill, amid the camp-fires; then, from their throats rung a fiendish yell so wild and piercing that it seemed as though the sound might pierce the distant cavern and awake their dead. What caused it?

Nothing could extort such an exultant cry from Apache throats, except a prospect of vengeance upon their enemies—the prospect of gloating over the dying agonies of a pale-face foe at the torture-stake. This extreme gratification seemed to await them when most coveted; for they had but just buried six of their warriors, slain by the hated Texans and the detested Tonkaway.

The signal yells had prepared them for good news, and they also knew, by a peculiar intonation of the concluding whoop, that some of their tribe, who had been on a spying expedition, had arrived. So, when they gained a view of their camp, they saw a party of braves, riding into it, and in their midst, a captive maiden, whose wondrous beauty and wealth of golden hair fairly dazed them, as they sprung in a body to greet their brother butchers.

The pallid and horror-stricken face of Laura Libby! upon which fell the soft rays of the moon, showing every outline, seemed unearthly; even the brutal warriors of the Pecos stood in their tracks, filled for the moment with awe, as if they believed they were gazing at a visitor from an unknown world. Well they might; for she did not seem to have been created to breathe the same air, or tread the same earth, with the murder-stamped devils that surrounded her.

The braves who had captured Laura seemed greatly to enjoy the bewilderment of the main war-party, which, however, was but momentary; for, as the chief of the tribe advanced, and felt of the golden hair of the trembling girl, and pinched her hands which were bound to the saddle, he gave a grunt of satisfaction, which was repeated by the assembled horde, who now appeared to be relieved of the superstitious feeling that, at the first, had taken possession of their ignorant minds. Conversing and gesticulating among themselves, they returned to the camp-fires, and the chief gave directions to the new-comers, where and how to secure their captive.

Faint with horror and dread, and filled with

despair, as she found herself in the midst of these savages, Laura gave up all hope of ever again seeing a white face, and trembled as she thought of what might be before her. At first when she had regained her senses, and realized that the Indians were hurrying away from the spot where she had seen the one she loved, as she supposed, shot down, she reasoned that the scout and the Indians whom she had seen but a moment before, would soon miss their comrade, and turn back. Then, she believed, they would discover the trail of the Apaches, and would follow it to avenge the death of their friend. But they had galloped on, mile after mile, until at length she had given up all hope of a rescue. Never, for a moment, did the possibility of her lost lover being alive enter her mind; and, as the painted fiends now led her horse into the timber, she prayed for death.

Such was the condition of her mind, as she thought of what the future had in store for her. But no groan broke from her pallid lips, as she was roughly dragged from her horse, and bound to the trunk of a tree, amid the jeers of the red brutes, who had torn her from those whom she loved, and basely slain him who had ruled her thoughts and dreams for years.

Leaving a single warrior to guard the captive maiden, the Apaches who had bound her repaired to the opening where they were soon feasting with their fellow butchers around the camp-fires.

The brave who had been appointed as a sentinel, stood leaning against a tree, his arms folded, and his eyes gazing gloatingly into hers, but not uttering a word. Laura found it impossible to remove her eyes from those of the hideous savage.

The silence of her keeper seemed but to increase her terrors. She felt that it would be a great relief, only to have the red fiend speak; even did he hurl taunting words and vile threats in her ears.

For some minutes, these strange and horrid feelings ruled her brain; then a mist, which thickened into a dense cloud, kindly fell upon her, her head sunk forward lower and lower, her golden hair fell below her waist, veiling her face from the stare of those terrible glittering eyes, and the beautiful captive was again insensible.

The horrors through which she had passed, the thought that perhaps her mother had been slain by these same merciless captors of hers, when they attacked the camp of the wagon-train, and the probability that the idol of her heart, from whom a cruel fate had separated her for so long a time, had also been killed while attempting to rescue her—all this, with her own terrible situation, and the dread possibilities of the future, was enough, and more than enough, to prostrate the soul and numb the brain of a strong man, much more that of a timid and fragile maiden.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ATTEMPTED RESCUE.

It was not five minutes after Laura Libby became unconscious, that Shooting Star rushed madly along the edge of the bottom timber, on the opposite side of the creek from the Apache camp, and within two rifle-shots of it.

His eyes were glaring, and his breath came thick and fast, from the almost superhuman efforts he had made to gain the Indian encampment, as quickly as was possible after the arrival of the braves with their captive. He was in no condition, at this moment, to take advantage of his knowledge of Indian character, and to use successfully the slow and tedious methods of strategy that would be necessary for the work he was about to attempt. However, he had not covered more than half the distance which would place him abreast of the Apaches, when around a bend of the creek below him, galloped his red pard, Rattlesnake, who, upon discovering Shooting Star, and seeing the light of the camp-fires, realized that he could proceed no further with safety upon his horse, and so sprung to the earth, securing his mustang within the timber, and then bounded like a deer to intercept and prevent the young scout from the desperate undertaking which the Tonkaway felt sure his white friend had decided upon.

Shooting Star, when directly across from the Indian encampment, guided by the light of the fires, dashed into the dense bottom, and sprung over the creek to the opposite bank; where he was forced to halt, partly from fatigue, and partly from the certainty that he was jeopardizing his own life, as well as his prospect of freeing Laura Libby, by thus foolishly advancing upon the enemies' encampment.

Panting with exertion, the young scout peeped through the branches. Blinded at first by the flashing glare through the timber, it was some little time before he began to discern, at intervals, groups of warriors, seated and standing, devouring huge slices of meat like half-starved wolves. A moment's inspection told him that the captive girl was not there.

Grating his teeth with impatience, he was about to press forward, when a sight met his eye that caused his blood to boil with madness and his hand to clutch his bowie.

Midway between his position and the border of the timber, dimly outlined now and then by the flashing firelight, was the one he sought. She was, as he could see, bound to a tree, her head bending forward, and her long golden hair hanging over her face and breast. From her position, the young scout judged that she had fainted, and his form trembled as if stricken with ague as he gathered his strength for a desperate bound, and drew his knife from its sheath.

At this instant Rattlesnake stole through the bushes, grasped the young man by the arm and gave a low hiss of caution. But the sight of Laura in such a position had maddened her lover. He was now beyond all restraint. Shaking off the hold of his friend like a panther springing upon its prey, the young man dashed through the underbrush toward the senseless captive.

With a grunt of intense surprise and indignation at the folly of his white pard, the Tonkaway stood in his tracks, knowing that it would be madness to follow him.

Although he would at any time have risked his life for the young scout, he well knew that if he rushed to his assistance now, both would be captured or slain, whereas, if he succeeded in evading notice, it might even yet be in his power to remedy the mistake which Shooting Star had made.

With great concern Rattlesnake saw the young scout dart directly toward the captive, but before he reached the tree to which she was bound, an Apache brave sprung from a point near at hand, directly in the path of the Texan.

But there was nothing human that could have stopped the headlong and desperate rush of Shooting Star toward that madly-loved form, and, with knives in air, red and white rushed into each other's arms. Only for an instant did the steel flash in the air, and then, with the strength of ten men in his grasp, the young scout, with one hand seizing the hair of the Apache, bent his form over his knee, and drove his bowie hilt deep into the bronzed breast.

Hurling the mortally wounded brave from his path, with one bound Shooting Star was at the side of the captive girl, but, as he wound his arm around her waist and hastily slashed the cords that bound her, the death-yell of the Apache, which had rung wild and weird through the arches of the timber, sending the blood surging to the young man's heart, showed him too late his mistake.

Grasping Laura in his arms, he dashed toward the creek, but the next instant a yelling horde of savages came crashing through the underbrush, and he received a blow upon the head, and man and maid both lay senseless on the bank of the stream.

The moment that Rattlesnake saw the Apache sentinel spring into the path of the young scout, he was positive that the camp would be aroused; for he realized that his white friend was so nearly insane at the sight of the senseless captive that he would never think of taking the precaution of smothering the death-yell, should he come off victor in the struggle. Not only did he fear this, but he expected that the sentinel would give a warning whoop, and he well knew that the bottom would soon swarm with braves. Lightning-like these reasonings flashed through his brain, then, climbing into a tree, he ensconced himself within the thick branches, where he observed the capture of the young scout, an event which he had felt positive would occur.

The exultant Apaches now dragged Laura to the same tree to which she had been bound, and again secured her in her former position, her senses returning as the cruel cords lacerated her wrists and the taunts and jeers sounded in her ears.

At the first she was at a loss to know what had transpired; but, as a number of braves dragged the senseless and bleeding form of Shooting Star directly before her, then held him against a tree-trunk and bound him fast, she knew that her lover had again risked his life to save her, and filled with dread and horror though she was at the fearful sight, feelings of deep thankfulness soon filled her heart, for she had believed Charles Audley to have fallen when they met on the Hondo. She knew that the Indians would not now secure him to a tree if he was dead, neither did she believe they would do so if he were dangerously wounded.

The fair captive, much to her surprise, found her feelings greatly changed. She was now cool, calm and calculating upon the chances of the future. The knowledge that he whom she had loved so long was not dead banished partially the despair and desire for death that before had taken possession of her. She knew, by what Rattlesnake had told her in San Antonio, that Shooting Star and an old scout were his inseparable companions. This last must be the man whom she had observed, when bound to the mustang, at the spot where the young scout was shot at by her captors.

She now felt confident that the two friends of her lover would, upon discovering his absence, follow his trail, or else observe the Indian trail, and come to the conclusion that he had been captured. It must be so. The old scout and

the Tonkaway must even now be following them up, and, being well versed in prairie and wood craft, and with the manners and customs of the Indians as well, would, by some artful strategy, effect the release of Shooting Star and of herself.

These thoughts flitted rapidly through the mind of our heroine, while the horde of howling Apaches were securing her lover to the tree.

CHAPTER X.

THE OUTLAW BAND.

WHEN the Apaches had bound the senseless young man, they stepped backward between the two captives, and at the same moment two warriors approached from the opening, the one in the lead bearing a torch, which he upheld, throwing the light full upon the face and form of Charles Audley.

The last of the two was evidently the chief of the war-party.

He was short and muscular, with a most hideous countenance, which was rendered more fiendish by an ugly scar that showed his cheek to have been laid open to the bone, from his eye to the corner of his mouth. This frightful proof of some terrible hand-to-hand encounter had, it seemed, been purposely left bare of paint, either as a distinguishing mark or to cause his features to present a more hideous appearance than if daubed with the parallel bars of vermilion and ochre.

Three eagle-feathers proclaimed his rank, a bear-claw collar decorated his short neck, and a huge peculiarly-engraved silver plate hung over his breast, suspended by a chain from the collar, while above the circular silver ornament was roughly painted in black pigment a prairie wolf with eyes of yellow ochre, its mouth open and its tongue hanging outward, the fangs being delineated in white.

This chief was Lone Wolf, the most merciless foe that the bordermen of Texas were ever forced to contend against, not excepting old Cochise; and the mere mention of his suggestive name would cause brave men to shudder, women to tremble with terror, and children to huddle together and cry with terror and dread.

Folding his arms over his breast as he came near the captives, Lone Wolf paused, with an exultant expression resting upon his most repulsive face as he saw that a white man had been captured by his braves. But a moment stood he thus, when, with one bound, he reached the side of the still unconscious young scout, and placing his hand upon his forehead, thrust the captive's head upward against the trunk of the tree in a brutal manner, disclosing the ghastly face, down which little streams of blood had left fresh trails. Instantly an exultant yell left the chief's lips. He withdrew his hand, and the head of the young scout fell back to its old position upon his breast, as if devoid of all life.

A shrill scream of intense anguish burst from Laura Libby as she witnessed this, her cry mingling with the yell of the Apache chief. He, however, merely cast a quick glance from his fierce, snake-like eyes upon her, as his expression showed increased signs of exultation. Stepping backward again, Lone Wolf raised his right hand, and pointing at the young scout, cried out in a hoarse, deep voice, which expressed great satisfaction, mingled with the deepest hatred:

"Shooting Star!"

No sooner had the words left his brutal lips than a loud and ringing yell burst from the assembled braves, proving that they were confident no force of whites were now in the vicinity who would dare attack them.

Whirling about, the chief now faced Laura and his warriors, and exclaimed in loud tones:

"Braves of the Pecos, you have done well. Shooting Star has sent many of our warriors upon the long dark trail. His rifle never fails, and he knows not fear. It is well. He shall have big fire. He shall die at the torture-stake. Big Thunder and Red Bear will stay here. They must watch, for Shooting Star is not alone upon the war-path. My braves know that the little old scout goes with him. We know that Rattlesnake the Tonkaway goes with him. They are cunning as the fox, and will try to save their brother from the torture. Keep your eyes open, or your scalps will hang at the breast of the Tonkaway. He makes war upon those whose skin is like his own. Bring the scalp of Rattlesnake to Lone Wolf, and he will give a hundred mustangs. Come, warriors of the Pecos, we must sleep. When the sun comes the war-path will be open."

With these concluding words, Lone Wolf stepped forward toward Laura; and, as her horror-filled eyes became fixed upon his hideous features, he sprung toward the tree to which she was bound, and grasping her fair, gold-crowned head between his blood-stained palms, he slowly moved his fiendish face toward her delicate mouth, until his repulsive lips nearly touched hers that were now drawn and pale with loathing and terror, while shriek upon shriek rent the air—cries that would have filled with pity a heart of stone, but which seemed to give the assembled braves the greatest satisfaction, as with taunt and jeer they

filed past following their chief to the encampment.

Soon all was again quiet. Red Bear and Big Thunder walked here and there, about the captives, inspecting the thickets; their manner showing that they were sensible of the great responsibility which rested upon them, and were also aware that they were in no little danger, for both had witnessed more than once, the great skill, cunning, and bravery of the two friends of Shooting Star. They knew too, that these noted comrades of the captive were liable, at any moment, to crawl through the dark shades, in an endeavor to rescue the prisoners.

Had they known that, panther-like, but more dangerous to them than a hundred panthers, just above their heads in the dense shadows, crouched the Tonkaway, they would no doubt have taken to cover behind the tree-trunks, and yelled for their Apache brothers. But, luckily for our red friend, they had no suspicion of his presence, while he, observing their every movement by the glare that the camp-fires cast beneath the branches, clutched his hold tightly, filled with rage when he saw Lone Wolf forcing the head of his much loved white pard against the tree, and also infuriated at the brutal usage of the white maiden.

Rattlesnake had been forced to tax all his strong powers of forbearance to restrain himself from sounding his war-cry, and then leap down to battle singly with the horde of hated and despised Apaches. He had seen the white maiden cringe in horror and loathing, as the lips of the Apache chief had met her own, and had observed her form to tremble, as does an aspen, after Lone Wolf and his braves had returned to the opening. Then it was that he noticed that she suddenly assumed a desperate look, as she gazed upon the senseless form of the young scout, striving, when not watched by the two sentinels, to free her wrists from the cords that bound her.

The Tonkaway now glanced toward the Apache camp, being obliged, in order that he might do so, to sink his head below the branch upon which he rested, and saw that the warriors had rolled themselves in their blankets for the night. His eyes strove, at the same time, to pierce the gloom toward the creek; and he listened intently, evidently thinking that Old Rocky ought to be in the vicinity somewhere, and regretting now that he had left the old scout in so hasty and unceremonious a manner.

Detecting no sounds that would indicate to his practiced ear the approach of aid from any quarter, he suddenly drew himself upward, and carefully gained the trunk of the tree, upon the branch of which he had been reclining. Here he postured himself with his back against the tree, and his feet resting securely upon two huge branches. This done, he drew his bow, together with an arrow, fitted the deadly dart to the string, and collected his keen senses for a deadly and dangerous purpose. Ready to take advantage of any movement below, that would favor him in an attempt to liberate the captives, the Tonkaway waited. He had observed that Big Thunder had taken a position toward the creek, and facing the camp, while Red Bear was some twenty yards nearer the opening. The glow of the fires showed the form and face of Big Thunder quite plainly, and a clump of thick bushes screened the latter from the view of Red Bear; both standing still and silent, and apparently listening for any sound that would indicate the approach of an enemy.

Quick as thought a plan flashed through the brain of Rattlesnake; and, with an active mind like his, to think was to act.

Stealthily detaching a small piece of bark from the trunk, the Tonkaway threw the same toward and above the position of Big Thunder, in such a way as to cause a rustle of leaves just over the head of the Apache.

As the bark left his hand, Rattlesnake bent his bow, using great care and caution, knowing that his life, and the life of those he held dear would depend upon his skill. The bark whizzed through the branches, and Big Thunder bent his head backward, his face filled with surprise and apprehension. The Tonkaway had thrown the bark with the express purpose of luring the Apache into this position; and the instant that the latter stood thus favorable to his plan, a long-drawn howl, in imitation of a black wolf, left the Tonkaway's lips, drowning the twang of his bow-string, as he let fly an arrow which pierced the heart of Big Thunder, who sunk to the earth lifeless, and without a sound.

Quickly removing his quiver, and hanging the same with his bow upon a branch, our red friend drew his scalping-knife, and gathered all his strength, for the most desperate and dangerous part of his pre-arranged programme.

Red Bear stalked stealthily around the thicket, and peered, in seeming surprise, on every side of the clear space where he had left Big Thunder. Then he gave a low signal, standing a moment in silent expectation of an answer, but receiving none, he advanced until the prostrate form was before him, but as it was below the glare that was cast by the camp-fires in the opening, he did not see the tell-tale arrow.

Evidently thinking that Big Thunder had

fallen asleep, he gave an indignant grunt, and bent over the corpse, laying his hand upon it, as if with the intention of awakening his brother brave.

The instant that the form of Red Bear bent forward, Rattlesnake sprung down like a panther from his perch in the tree, his feet striking the Apache in the small of the back with terrific force. A sickening sound of cracking bones told the Tonkaway that the spinal column of his foe was broken; but he knew there was yet danger, for a death-yell might burst on the air in a moment if he did not finish his work with the rapidity of thought. In a second more he was astride of Red Bear, his hand over the Apache's mouth, and his bowie knife buried in his enemy's quivering side. The brave sunk dead, with only a gurgling, blood-smothered cry. With quick movements, Rattlesnake jerked the arrow from the breast of Big Thunder, and then drawing the knives from the belts of each of his fallen foes, he placed the same in their hands, laying the bodies in such a manner that it would be thought they had slain each other in combat. Having taken this precaution, he hastened to the tree to which Shooting Star was bound and cut his bonds, the young scout falling limp and senseless as he did so.

The Tonkaway was about to clasp his white pard in his arms and carry him over the creek, intending to return for the white maiden, when his keen ears detected the swishing of branches across the stream, and also to the west. Fearing danger, he loosened a lariat from his waist and secured one end to the form of Shooting Star; then, with the other held between his teeth, he sprang up into the tree, drew up the young scout, and gaining a position higher up amid the dense branches, he seated himself, with the senseless form of his friend in his arms, and panting with exertion and fatigue, awaited developments.

Not long had our red friend to wait, however. The sounds among the bushes increased, as if many animals were approaching through the bottom timber. Soon it changed to a crashing of brush and limbs, and the next instant a score of desperate, crime-stamped white men galloped from the south and west directly to the tree where Laura Libby was bound. The captive girl had, with great amazement, witnessed the fall of Big Thunder, and the flying leap of the Tonkaway from the tree upon Red Bear. She had recognized Rattlesnake, and was filled with joy when she saw her lover cut loose from the tree. When she saw him again climb the tree, drawing up the young scout after him, she was puzzled, but thought that he would immediately return for herself. It was at this moment that her attention was attracted by the sounds which, in her new-born hope, she had not noticed. When the horses bounded free from the bushes, and she saw white men upon their backs, her heart gave a great throb of joy and relief, but the next instant, a piercing shriek burst from her very soul.

"Duke Darrow! Father in heaven, save me!"

These words fell from the lips of Laura Libby in the intensity of a hopeless despair. Then, as her bonds were cut, she sunk senseless into the arms of her most dreaded enemy—one whom she abhorred, detested, and hated; whom she believed to be her father's murderer!

As the cry of the young girl rung through the opening, the Apaches sprung from their blankets in consternation, and grasped their arms, at a loss how to account for the strange sound, but still confident no enemy could be near.

To their surprise was soon added great alarm. The mounted horsemen were in full view.

"Shooting Star is not here, boys," cried out the one who seemed to be the leader of the band, catching Laura in his arms as he spoke. "I'd give a thousand slugs to have him under my thumb, but we must git. Mount and away! Cut through the red devils' camp. Git!"

As the outlaw chief yelled these words he mounted with Laura in his arms, and spurred, at the head of his men, directly into and through the Apache camp, shooting down the braves upon every side, and soon reaching the north end of the encampment, disappeared in a wild gallop toward the cliff, where the Apaches, but a little time before, had buried their dead.

Lone Wolf and his warriors had felt so secure—the camp being well guarded and no force of whites having been reported by the advance and side spies of the war-party—that they had lain down feeling as safe as if they had been west of the Rio Pecos. So it was that they were so demoralized and bewildered by the sudden and unexpected charge of Duke Darrow's gang of bandits, that they fired but few shots; however, three of the outlaws' horses were crippled by arrows and their riders captured, the band not daring to return and attempt a rescue.

In thunder tones Lone Wolf now ordered the three bandits to be bound and stretched upon the ground. The Apache chief had not failed to see that the whites who had charged through his camp had taken the golden-haired maid with them, and it filled him with madness that was terrible to witness. With a dozen warriors at

his back he rushed to the bottom timber, swearing that he would split the heads of Red Bear and Big Thunder for not giving the alarm in the first place, and then sneaking to cover to avoid the foe.

Rattlesnake, as soon as the outlaws charged toward the Apache camp, saw that his opportunity had arrived, and regretted greatly that he had not had time to release the white maiden before he was startled by the bandits. The present confusion was his opportunity for escape. Quickly lowering Shooting Star to earth, he regained his weapons; then taking the form of the young scout in his arms, he stalked rapidly to the thicket, made his way across the stream into the dense timber, and, laying his white pard gently amid the bushes, he tore a quantity of thick moss from the rocks below the surface of the water, laying masses of this sponge-like plant upon the head of the young man. All around them the night air was filled with yells and shrieks, and the rattling report of fire-arms, with all the accompaniments of a sanguinary struggle.

While the Tonkaway was thus occupied, his quick ear detected other sounds near at hand, and he grasped his weapons ready for battle, but a peculiar signal caused him to drop the same and utter a low grunt of extreme pleasure, as a stealthily approaching footfall was followed by a well-known voice.

"Dog gone my cats!"

CHAPTER XI.

OLD ROCKY APPEARS.

"Dog gone my half-sister's black cat, Tonk! What, in ther name o' Crockett, are up the crick?"

These words burst from the lips of Old Rocky, as he entered the thicket where Rattlesnake stood over the form of the senseless young scout. He spoke in an excited, but low tone, stopping short in speech and movement as he caught a glimpse of the face of Shooting Star.

In another instant he was on his knees on the ground, his hand over the heart of his young pard.

Detecting a faint pulsation, his countenance at once brightened as he proceeded further to examine the young man and ascertain what wounds he had received. At the same time, he continued his questioning; the Tonkaway all the while standing silent and grim, looking down upon his two white pards.

"What's ther meanin' o' this rumpus, Tonk? How kin our pard ter git inter sich a fix? I 'lowed I'd be too late fer ther fandango, but hit's all owin' ter yer levantin' so speedin' 'thout sayin' a word."

"Shooting Star heap fool," explained the Indian. "Squaw no good on war-path. Rattlesnake say wait, but young scout run like wind. Kill Apache brave, but brave sound death-yell. Warriors come thick. Knock Shooting Star on head, then tie up. Rattlesnake climb tree. Kill two braves, then pull young scout up. Hear bad white men come from creek. Bad white men take squaw with hair like sunshine. Ride fast through camp of Lone Wolf. Have heap big fight. Rattlesnake come here quick. Saye young scout. Not much hurt. Mebbe so open eyes soon. Lone Wolf heap mad. Come for Shooting Star. No see young scout with bad white men. Now old scout know all."

The last words were spoken by the Indian in a low tone, for the Apaches, led by Lone Wolf, were beating the bushes on the opposite side of the creek, in search of their captive.

Old Rocky and the Tonkaway stood with weapons ready, determined to defend their pard to the death; but the enemy did not venture across the stream, and soon returned to their camp with long-drawn howls, bearing the bodies of Big Thunder and Red Bear, the death of both, found in the position they were, being a fathomless mystery to them. No less so was the disappearance of Shooting Star, who they knew, was not with the whites who had charged through the camp.

"Jumpin' Jerusalem!"

This ejaculation burst from the old scout's lips in the extremity of wonder, as the Apaches passed from the bottom into their camp. Then he added:

"This are the wustest mixed lay-out I ever see'd. Who war ther bad white men what hev skuted with the gal o' Shootin' Star's?"

"Mebbe so young scout know who want his squaw. Rattlesnake see chief of bad white men in San Antonio. How long go? Many moons."

"Waal, dog-gone my cats! I wish ther 'Paches hed her till yit, fer I'm dead sure Shootin' Star 'll foller, ef ther trail leads clean ter ther Staked Plains. An' we hed ther best show ter resky her from ther reds. White outlaws is a danged sight harder ter sarcumvent nor ther painted heathen. What's ter be did now, Tonk?"

"Get water in sombrero. Pour on young scout's head."

"Reckon yer head's level, Tonk; but I'll sw'ar mine hain't. Dang'd ef I hain't completely bamboozled, throw'd off my center wi' ther way things hes panned out."

With these words, the old scout hastened to

the creek and returned with his hat full of water, which he dashed over the head and face of Shooting Star, who, with a low moan, opened his eyes in bewilderment and looked vacantly at his pards for a moment.

"Yer a heap better nor a dozen corpuses, pards," said Old Rocky, with much relief in his face and words; "kinder sot up a leetle, an' round up yer ideas, fer we're in ther 'closest kind of a fix."

At once the near past seemed to flash through the mind of the young man, and he sprung to his feet, gazing over the stream in a wild stare; then he bent his glances in a questioning and horror-stricken manner upon his pards, as he asked:

"Tell me, for Heaven's sake tell me if Laura is still in the power of those howling brutes! Why did you save me, and leave her to a terrible fate? But I'll tear her from them; or lose my life in the attempt!"

"Hold yer mustang a bit, pard," reasoned Old Rocky, as he supported the tottering form of his young friend. "Yer leetle gal ain't in ther 'Pache camp at ther present time, though I wisht she war."

Turning to the Tonkaway, the old scout inquired:

"What way did ther bad whites come?"

The Indian, by a sweep of his hand, indicated the direction in which the outlaws had approached.

"Didn't yer hev no warnin' that p'inted ter ther 'rival fore they broke brush, an' cut ther gal loose?"

"One bad white man come. He look at young squaw. He look at young scout. Then he run over creek. Bimeby all come, but young scout up tree with Rattlesnake. No time get white squaw."

Shooting Star stood silent, and seemed to be drinking in every word, and striving as he did so to regain his usual reasoning powers, fearfully blurred as they were by the blows which he had received.

"Hit 'pears ter me then," said Old Rocky, "thet ther outlaws must 'a' bin a-follerin' ther train, er layin' fer hit, an' see'd ther reds when they tuck the gal; an' then they skuted this-a-way. They warn't on ther make, that's sartin; an' I'll sw'ar hit looks like they know'd ther hull biz clean through. Know'd ther gal, an' risk'd a heap ter git a bolt on her. I'll bet a heap hit's ther Devil Duke what's tuck her, an' I hes 'spicioned 'bout whar his cave are fer some time. Hit's in these hyer hills, high up toward Camp Verde. I used ter know ther trail."

"Oh, God! Give me strength to follow the fiend to his stronghold! Pards, our trail leads to Val Verde. Help me to rescue my darling from the power of a devil—from a fate far worse than death!"

As the last words were spoken, the young scout braced himself, his eyes blazed with fury, and he strove to shake off the detaining grasp of Old Rocky.

"Easy, easy, pard," said the old scout in a soothing voice. "We hes gut things mixed 'bout bad enough, by bein' too dang'd fast. Be dead sure ye're right, then go ahead, es Davy Crockett used ter spit out quite frequent. We hes got ter play fine ter win our game. Lone Wolf are jist a-billin' over with ole he mad; an' he'd clean out the hull o' Devil Duke's crowd ef he gut a show. I hes a idee we kin use ther 'Paches, an' make 'em play right inter our hands. We-uns must git ther red bellyuns started on ther trail arter Devil Duke's band jist es soon es we kin; an' when Lone Wolf hes thinned ther outlaws, we'll glide in an' resky Laura. Tonk, does yer know whar ther 'Paches planted ther dead braves, what we bored 'fore we got up an' dusted down crick?"

The Indian pointed in a northerly direction, answering:

"Big hole in hill. Rattlesnake leave mustang there. See trail when he go look for young scout."

"Good! Is yer fear'd o' dead corpuses?"

"Rattlesnake knows no fear. Tonkaway fear nothin'."

"Good ag'in. Now, I'll spit out my plan. Shooting Star, yer must do jist es yer old pard tells yer. I hes got ter saddle an' bridle, an' I 'lows ter rope a Injin nag inside o' a half hour. Tonk, yer kin take our pard 'long wi' yer ter whar them dead corpuses war cached; an' jist split yer throat a-bowlin' an' yellin' from this on till yer sees fun. I'll jine yer party soon. When ther 'Paches hears yer yowlin' they'll think ther dead are raisin' a rumpus, kase they is layin' hyer in camp, 'stid o' goin' fer blood an' he'r; an' purty soon yer'll see Lone Wolf an' his scarifyers git up an' git on a syklone stompede. Ef they doesn't go fer Devil Duke, I'm a thunderin' ole idget, an' don't know nothin' 'bout ther red bellyuns. They won't catch ther outlaws 'fore Devil Duke strikes ther cave, an' crawls inter his hole; an' then we'll take a back seat, an' squint at snake eat snake, an' watch out fer chances ter drap in an' resky ther gal. Pards, what does yer think o' thet plan, in ther way o' double-distilled boss sense?"

"Good. Heap good," said the Tonkaway briefly.

"Let us do something," said Shooting Star, or "I shall go mad. Your plan seems straight and reasonable, and I think we had better act at once as you propose. I am glad you secured my equipments, old pard. Give me your hands, both of you. Stand by me now, for I need your services more than ever before. May God cheer and sustain my poor darling! I fear she will die with despair and horror, when she finds herself in the power of that fiend. I secreted my rifle somewhere here before I crossed the creek to reconnoiter."

"Gun here," said Rattlesnake, as he pointed to the weapon, which he had discovered while the old scout was talking. Thrusting his hand into his bullet pouch, Old Rocky drew out a small flask, saying, as he passed it to Shooting Star:

"Hyar, pard, take a stiff dose o' thet brandy, an' hit'll put some vim inter yer, 'sides stiffenin' yer back-bone fer ther biz what's ahead. Pards, levant's ther word. I'll see yer ag'in 'fore soon; bet yer life on thet ef I doesn't lose my ha'r. Fill ther bill, Tonk, es I hes 'splained. So long!"

With these words, Old Rocky glided off down the stream; and Rattlesnake, closely followed by Shooting Star, began making his way up the creek for a little distance, then crossed, so near to the Apache camp that they could hear the confused murmur which arose, and now and then a howl for the dead, or a yell of vengeful meaning.

The old scout, after leaving his pards in the thicket, advanced but a few paces, when he stopped in his tracks until fully satisfied by the light swishing of bush and branch, that the Tonkaway had departed. He then hastened for about two hundred yards down the stream, crossed it, and groped his way through the dense shades to the place where he had secreted his pony, which he now led along the margin of the timber, where, upon the plain but a few paces from him, the Apaches were grazing their animals.

Detaching his lasso from the saddle, he coiled the same for use, and then gave his horse a quick, hard punch in the telly, which caused the animal to snort. The Indian pony which was nearest to his position, threw up its head, snuffed the air, and scenting one of its kind, walked slowly into the timber, now distinctly outlined against the moonlight of the plain. Quickly the lasso of the old scout cut the air, and the noose settled over the neck of the pony. With a snort of fear and surprise the animal drew back, but soon came to a sudden halt, and Old Rocky drew the mustang toward him. The saddle and bridle of Shooting Star, which he had brought with him were soon upon the stolen steed.

This done, the old scout led both animals into a dense thicket, secured them to trees, and then cautiously advanced up stream to the border of the timber, from which point he could view the camp of the Apaches.

To his surprise he saw that the Indians had a dozen horses fully equipped for the trail, and were binding the corpses of as many braves to the saddles. He decided that these were the guards who had been placed over the captives, and had been killed by Shooting Star and the Tonkaway, while the others had fallen before the outlaws.

This proceeding gave Old Rocky some little concern in regard to the success of his project, for he felt that these bodies were destined for burial in the cavern. But this feeling was soon banished, for a series of loud howls now sounded, apparently from within the cave.

Every warrior in the Apache camp stood motionless, and as they seemed to realize from whence the weird sounds proceeded, they became frozen in their positions, from superstitious terror, for they believed them to come from the spirits of the dead, who were angry at something that had been done or left undone, and could not depart on the long, dark trail.

Lone Wolf gave a rallying yell, and his warriors gathered around him, gazing as they did so, with fixed stare, between the oak mottes toward the cliffs.

The chief, seeing that his braves were all present, thus proving that the sounds did not proceed from any of his own war-party who were alive, was himself filled with dread at the unaccountable howls, fully believing that the spirits of the slain were delayed, or kept back from their trail to the happy hunting-grounds beyond the moon, by the knowledge that their deaths had not been avenged upon the pale-faces. Lone Wolf was stirred. He spoke rapidly, in a low but deep voice.

"Warriors of the Pecos! The blood of our braves calls for vengeance. Their spirits fly in the air, and howl at us. They are angry that we linger in camp when the war-path is open. Vamonos! the white dogs shall not ride through Lone Wolf's camp and laugh at him. We will drink their blood. Their scalps shall hang at our belts when we cross the Pecos. The squaw with hair like the sun shall sweep the lodge of Lone Wolf. We will take our dead braves to the cave, tear down the rocks, and leave them with their brothers. Lone Wolf is not afraid. The spirits of those who have been shot like dogs in camp are waiting for their horses. They

wish to ride fast, that they may catch their brothers who have gone before."

Every warrior now sprung quickly, in obedience to his chief. The horses were driven in, and equipped for the trail. The slain were bound upon their saddles, and once more the Apaches started for the cavern to dispose of their dead, although each and all of them were filled with superstitious terror, which, however, had now become somewhat abated by the cessation of the howls and chants.

Old Rocky was not a little alarmed, for he had not supposed for a moment that the Apaches would dare venture near the place of burial. He had forgotten one thing. Lone Wolf had less superstition than any chief of the tribe, and had also an almost unlimited command over his braves.

CHAPTER XII.

RATTLESNAKE'S RUSE.

RATTLESNAKE and Shooting Star reached the burial cave of the Apaches without having been discovered, as the alarm in Lone Wolf's camp caused by the unaccountable howling and yells of the Tonkaway has proved. The latter, having ensconced himself in a tree, on the margin of the motte opposite the cavern, began the performance of his part of the programme, as arranged by Old Rocky; but when he saw that the animals were collected in the camp, and that the Apaches were binding their dead upon horses, he felt sure that they intended to deposit them in the cave, regardless of his attempt to arouse their superstitious terrors and hasten their departure on the trail of the bandits who had taken away the fair captive.

Knowing that Shooting Star had no horse, the Tonkaway, ignorant of the fact that the old scout had secured an animal, determined to save the animals which he knew the Apaches intended to kill for the use of their dead on the long dark trail; and also, through the course he had resolved to pursue, hasten the followers of Lone Wolf on the trail of the bad whites, through a second, and what he felt sure would be a successful attempt to awaken all their superstitious fears.

With these new thoughts and plans in his mind, the Tonkaway descended the tree, and ran to the walled-up entrance of the place of recent burial, where Shooting Star was seated upon the earth in a state of utter despondency, brought on by the capture of Laura Libby by one who, he knew, would hesitate at no crime, however brutal and cowardly.

His despondency and inactivity, however, were caused chiefly by the severe blow he had received on the head, and the almost superhuman exertions he had made to reach the Apache camp before harm could be done to the one whom he so dearly loved—from whom he had been forced to banish himself for two most miserable years. After having been deprived of her society for a length of time that seemed an age, he had enjoyed but a glimpse of her angelic face, in a path of moonlight, and framed in the wildest surroundings. Then, when he had been raised into the seventh Heaven of bliss at the sight, she had been dragged from his reach by merciless savages. Hurling an Apache from his path at the point of his knife, he had gained her side, had held her unconscious form to his breast while prayers of the sincerest thankfulness had burst from his lips and heart; and then, he had been struck to the earth, and again lost her only to learn, when consciousness returned, that she was in the power of Duke Darrow, the notorious outlaw! No wonder was it that the young man thought all the fates were against him, and was now nearly hopeless; but the appearance and words of his red pard, caused him to spring to his feet, and throw off, in a measure, his bitter thoughts.

"My white brother is full of sorrow, but smiles will build their nests on his lips before the moon grows small. The squaw whose hair has been kissed by the sun will stand by my white brother's side, and his heart will be glad. Let him remember he is a warrior, and that the war-path is open. Lone Wolf comes with his dead braves to the cave. Come. Rattlesnake will make the Apaches fly like the wind to the north—Shooting Star will climb the hill, and when he hears the howls of his red brother in the cave, he will throw big rocks down the steep sides in the bushes. The Apaches will think that the spirits of their dead are angry, and will fly like the wild horse when the panther screams. Come, Rattlesnake will go in the cave. Shooting Star will put back the stone, when his red brother is with the dead braves of the Apaches."

With the last words, the Tonkaway began to climb up between the vines and the rough rocks that had been placed across the entrance to the cavern. The young scout followed without speaking a word. The Indian soon pulled from its place a stone at the top of the wall, close to the natural arch, and passing the same to his pard, crawled into the opening, bidding Shooting Star replace the fragment of rock and then depart to the crest of the cliff. In five minutes after walling up the Tonkaway in the Apache tomb, the young scout gained a position some

fifty feet above the entrance to the cavern, and to the north of it. Here, sheltered by stunted cedars and hill mesquites, he gathered a large number of huge stones in a pile, ready for use. From his post to the motte below, the side of the cliff was covered with a growth of bushes. Having prepared himself, as he had been directed by the Tonkaway, the young scout awaited the advent of the Apaches, fully confident that he and his red pard could stampede the followers of Lone Wolf. He felt positive that the chief would not be able to control them, and that he would be forced into an immediate chase of the outlaws, urged on by a superstitious belief that the spirits of their dead demanded vengeance forthwith, and were even now watching their every movement.

Shooting Star had but just prepared himself, when, with a weird chant, interspersed with long-drawn howls, the Apaches entered the motte just below his position, leading the mustangs in front of the line, upon which were bound the blood-stained, paint-daubed corpses of the slain.

At an order from the chief, half a dozen braves sprung forward and drew away the network of vines from each side of the cave entrance. At the same moment the death-chant ceased, and all became silent. By a wave of the hand Lone Wolf now ordered the rocks to be removed, and filled with dread the warriors proceeded to obey, well knowing that their chief would shoot down any who hesitated to obey his command. But as they climbed upward to dislodge the topmost stones, a series of the most piercing, horrible and unearthly yells sounded from the natural tomb, and with cries of terror the braves sprung in one wild leap from the wall and bounded like deer into the midst of their comrades. As these terrified Indians sprung into their saddles, the chief and his remaining braves sat upon their horses, a nameless fright causing their blood to chill. Then it was that the tearing and bouncing of the rocks hurled by the young scout struck upon their ears.

They saw the sudden movements of the bushes as here and there things of a mysterious character came crashing toward them, while the unearthly yells and howls from the cavern increased. As one man, all the warriors in the party, except the chief, whirled their mustangs, bent forward and galloped at headlong speed from the motte out upon the moonlit plain. Then in a body they dashed northward, gazing now and then back, their eyes bulging and filled with terror and dread, as if expecting to see their dead in full chase.

Lone Wolf sat his horse like a statue of bronze, his eyes fixed upon the walled entrance of the cave; then, as he gazed, the upper portion of the wall fell outward with a crash, and at the opening thus formed, the hideous, blood-stained form of one of his slain warriors appeared, the arms of the corpse projecting down the wall, as if to crawl over and move toward him. At the same moment, an arrow hissed past his head, the feather end of the shaft grazing his cheek.

This was too much, even for Lone Wolf. Fully believing now that the spirits of the slain, maddened at his delay in avenging them, were controlling their former earthly tenements, he turned his horse and darted like a leaf before the gale from the dreadful depot of horrors. On he sped, after his terror-stricken braves; like them, too, gazing back as if fearing to be pursued by the dead.

"Wa-al, I hopes ter be scarified by alligator gars, an' nibbled ter death by dipper ducks, ef this ain't jist the bestest leetle fandango I ever see'd. Howsomever, bit'pears thet ther music didn't jist 'zactly suit ther boss butcher o' ther 'Paches. Hal hal hal! Dang'd ef I kin help laughin' right out, which I'd ortent ter do at a funeral, even ef ther corpses is pesky red niggers!"

Thus spoke Old Rocky, as he urged his horse and the captured mustang through the motte to the cave; he having witnessed the stampede, and having been partly able to account for it, as he had heard the howls of the Tonkaway, and felt that he had "put up the job."

As the old scout entered the clear space in front of the cavern, Rattlesnake crawled out from the Apache tomb, and looked triumphantly at Old Rocky. At the same moment, Shooting Star sprung down the declivity, and the trio of prairie pards were once more united.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE OUTLAWS' CAVE.

DUKE DARROW, or Devil Duke, as he was called by those who knew of his dastard deeds and murderous character, sped away from the Apache camp, filling the air with exultant yells and laughter, as he held to his breast the senseless form of Laura Libby, her golden hair flying in the wind over his shoulder, and mingling with his own flowing locks of raven hue. On they went, in a north-western direction, along the range of hills, on the opposite side of which, some twenty miles away, was Camp Verde, a United States Military Post.

Fast behind him galloped his ruffian followers, many of them cursing at having been put in such peril without having gained any plunder,

and at the loss of their comrades, killed in the charge through the Apache camp. What cared they if Devil Duke had won the stake for which he had played for years? They had gained nothing. They had suffered fatigue. Some of their number were dead. Others were wounded. It was the most foolish weakness their chief had ever shown.

They knew the character of the Lone Wolf, and felt assured that the vindictive Apache would follow their trail for the purpose of revenge. But for all this, they well knew that, should they revolt against Devil Duke, they would be powerless to defend themselves against their foes, red and white; for there were none in their ranks who were capable of holding and exercising authority.

Devil Duke seemed oblivious to all his surroundings. His whole attention was centered upon his fair captive, whose insensible form he now held in his arms.

Mile after mile the bandits flew along the range of hills, their course being through the scattering oaks which grew along the base of the elevation, and extending some distance from it.

The terrible strain upon Laura's mind, the dread horrors and savage scenes of bloodshed that she had witnessed, the almost certainty that her friends of the train had been butchered, the possibility that her lover, so long a stranger to her, had lost his life in the endeavor to save hers—all this, with the torture and privation from rest and food, added to the consciousness that she had at last fallen into the hands of her worst enemy on earth, had so paralyzed her brain, that it was no wonder when Duke Darrow cut her bonds, that she became senseless. This lethargy had now lasted for such a length of time that Devil Duke became alarmed and rode on more rapidly in order to reach his cavern, where he hoped to be able to revive the one he had so long coveted, and whom he had risked so much to capture.

At last the outlaw chief turned his steed abruptly toward the range and entered a narrow cleft in the same, he being far in advance of his followers. Soon he came to a small valley, at the end of this natural passage, upon three sides of which were high rock walls, the opening at the north side being thickly overgrown with oaks.

Along the base of the cliffs, and at intervals up their rough, jagged sides grew patches of stunted pines and prickly pear, while the valley itself, of some three acres in extent, showed plainly that it had been the grazing ground of the outlaws.

Devil Duke quickly dismounted, and with the form of Laura in his arms, proceeded up the eastern cliff side by a winding and difficult path for some fifty yards, then entering a small thicket of cedars, he stood upon a rock platform, which was at the entrance to an arched cavern. This was about six feet in height, and was screened from the view of any one below by the thicket.

Going along this dark passage the outlaw soon halted and gave a peculiar signal. But an instant had he to wait. Suddenly, from his right, a beautiful Mexican girl appeared bearing a pine torch in her hand, her features beaming with intense pleasure and welcome. But, as she caught sight of the fair form and face of the captive, who was still held in the arms of the outlaw chief, her eyes gleamed with jealous fury, and she stopped suddenly, her right hand clutching at a stiletto which glittered above the folds of her red sash.

She was attired in a skirt of pale blue silk that reached but to her knees, the same being richly embroidered. A tight-fitting rose-colored bodice showed off her symmetrical form, and upon her feet, which were very small, were a pair of highly ornamented French boots, the tops of which reached to her skirt. Her hair hung in luxuriant negligence to her waist, and was black as night, as were also her eyes, which now darted murderous glances toward the bandit chief and his senseless captive.

Devil Duke stood for a moment in great perplexity. He had, in his excitement, evidently forgotten the existence of the Mexican girl; or, at least had not thought of any tale by which he could explain why it was that he had brought a female to his secret haunt. It needed no very close observation to discern that the senorita loved the bandit chief, and up to that occasion had been given no reason for doubting his love for her. Hence the tiger-like jealousy which was now so plainly marked. But the outlaw recovered his usual manner so quickly that the senorita did not detect his momentary confusion, and in a tone well calculated to deceive her, he called out:

"How do, Bonita? You are safe, I see, and fresh as a cactus flower in the morning. Look! I have brought you a companion. You will not be lonely now when I am away."

"Devil Duke is as cunning as a fox," returned the girl; "but Bonita is not a fool that his false words should enter her ears like the song of birds."

"What do you mean?" asked the outlaw, impatiently.

"I mean that you cannot deceive me, for I

know you have brought this pale beauty to take my place. You no longer love me; but beware! My stiletto shall pierce the hearts of both of you. When your love wanders from the girl you tore from a happy home, you die; and by the hand of her whom you have so wronged!"

As Bonita spoke, she appeared about to spring upon the bandit chief, and her words were hissed from her lips, while her eyes blazed like those of an enraged panther. A laugh of assumed unconcern came from Devil Duke, as he replied:

"Why, Bonita! I just get your meaning, and I am greatly amused. You are jealous, my darling, but without cause. I have captured this girl, and intend to hold her for ransom. Her father is rich. But lead on to the cave chamber, or she will die on our hands, and we will not make a dollar from this whole night's work."

Bonita looked steadily at him as he spoke, then her hand dropped from the handle of her knife, her excitement subsided, and, forced by the words and manner of the outlaw to believe him, she turned about, and led the way through an arched passage to a cavern of some extent, upon the walls of which were several torches, which showed it to be well supplied with furniture, a luxurious couch occupying one corner.

Hastening to this, Devil Duke threw the form of Laura Libby roughly upon it; which act, with the words that followed, seemed to banish all suspicion of his disloyalty from the mind of the Mexican girl. Clearly he had seen the situation.

"There you lay!" he exclaimed, as he cast the senseless girl upon the couch, heaving a sigh of relief as he did so. "Glad enough I am to be relieved of such a burden. I declare I wouldn't climb the cliff with such a load again for half the ransom I expect to force from her old dad. Come to my arms, Bonita; I am weary, worn, and hungry. You do not know how rejoiced I am to see you again."

The senorita clung about the bandit's neck and rained kisses upon his cheeks and lips, which he returned with evident affection. Then, as if fearing further questioning, he released himself gently, and said:

"That will do for the present, Bonita. We have had great trouble in getting this captive into our power, and I do not care to have her die on our hands. I must now hasten to the valley, and direct the men in regard to defense, as we may be attacked. Do all in your power to revive the girl, and prevail upon her to eat, if you can; for she has suffered great terror and hardship on this trip, as you can see."

"Bonita is the slave of Diablo Duke," said the Mexican girl. "She will cure for the strange girl as she would for her own sister." With these words, which showed that jealousy had ceased to rule her, the senorita bent over the silent form of Laura, while Devil Duke hastened from the apartment and descended the cliff, reaching his horse just as his followers, in a long line, entered the narrow passage to the south. As the rufian band slowly rode toward their chief with dark and sullen looks, Devil Duke saw and understood what was the trouble, and, for once, was at a loss what to do or say to excuse the rashness of which he had been guilty, in charging through the Apache camp without there being any gain to the band by his so doing. But at this moment a man came galloping to the oaks at the north of the valley and made halt within ten feet of the outlaw chief. Deferring speech with the hand for the present, Devil Duke cried out:

"Well, Bill! Where do you come from, and what news?"

"I'm just from down the country, and I've trailed an outfit of four wagons to the Hondo, where they are encamped. The train belongs to a wealthy man who intends locating about ten miles below the hills, and it looks as though things might pan out tolerably rich for us."

"Good boy, Bill! This comes in the right time."

Then turning to the band, whose faces had begun to brighten at the news, the bandit chief called out:

"Boys, we have been through a tight place to-night, with some loss, and we stand a chance to be attacked by the red hellions under Lone Wolf. You have done well, and I have no doubt that we can defend ourselves against the Apaches should they approach the valley. When we have driven them off we will look after the train that Bill speaks of, and I judge by what he says, it is a job that will pay all hands. You shall not be the losers by showing your fidelity to your chief this night. Lead your horses into the west gulch. Get your breakfasts, and then we will be ready for Lone Wolf. Bill, send a man to the look-out, post one in the oaks and another at the entrance to the south passage. Lead my horse along with the other animals, and then come and report the particulars of your trip to me."

As the chief ceased speaking, all whirled their mustangs, crossed the opening, and apparently disappeared in the cliff on the west side of the valley.

Devil Duke seated himself in a thicket at the

base of the cliff below the entrance of the cavern, where he was soon joined by the outlaw who had brought the intelligence of the train on the Hondo.

"Well, Bill," said the chief, "take a seat, and give me the full details of your spying trip."

"That I will do, captain, in short meter, for I'm all broke up, and need food and rest. In the first place, I obeyed your orders in regard to making a scout down the Hondo, but I had not gone one-half the distance I intended when I caught sight of the white canvas of four wagons. The train was pointed up the stream, and I secreted myself in the edge of the timber, but a short mile from where the train turned in at a bend for the night camp. As the wagons passed very near my place of concealment, I had a chance to study the outfit, and, as I said at the first, I think it will pan out rich. However, just as I had concluded to make my way through the timber, and strike in this direction to report, much to my surprise I saw a beautiful girl riding along the wagon trail. While gazing at her in complete astonishment—for I tell you, Cap, she was a beauty, and no mistake—I was perfectly upset to see a party of Apache braves speed out from the bush, capture her, and drag her into the bottom. But, I tell ye, she showed grit, for she shot a red and killed his horse. You can bet I was rather frightened, for I did not expect to see a war-party so far down creek. Well, I proceeded upstream, keeping pretty shady, and soon I heard the war-cries of the red devils. I knew then that they had stolen in on the camp of the train; but I soon found out that the Apaches had levanted without doing much mischief. I kept on up-stream, and after awhile saw the reds break bush ahead of me. Soon after a white man sprung from the bottom on foot, gazed after the reds, and then ran like a deer under cover of the timber up the Hondo. The white man I recognized as Shooting Star, the scout."

"The devil, you say!" exclaimed the bandit chief.

"Yes, I'm dead sure it was he; and, thinking some of his pards might be around, I secreted my horse, and then carefully entered the bottom where, from a mustang path, I saw the pards of the young scout—that cursed Tonkaway, Rattlesnake, and Old Rocky. Both of them were examining a dead horse that had an arrow projecting from its ribs. I then knew the reds had seen and shot at the young scout. When I saw the others coming in my direction, I levanted, knowing well that they would follow the Apaches and Shooting Star. I struck out on the north side of the creek, took to the prairie, and here I am at last."

"Bill, you surprise me greatly, and your news is very important. The girl you saw captured by the Apaches is just now above us, in my cave. What think you of that for my news?"

"The devil, you say! But, Cap, you must be joking. Such a thing as that is impossible."

"It is true though; even if, from your point of view it does look a little doubtful. The reds whom you saw capture her, joined the main war-party. I was out with the boys, discovered the Apaches, and sent a man in, on the spy. He reported a girl captive. Up to this time I had no idea of attacking the reds. I crawled to the vicinity of their camp, saw and recognized, not only the girl, but also Shooting Star—both attached to trees. If a thousand Apaches had stood in my path at that moment, I would have charged them to gain possession of the girl; to say nothing of our deadly enemy, the young scout. I returned to the place where I had left our band, got the boys ready, and riding slowly until quite near, we stole in, secured the girl—who, by the way is an old sweet-heart of mine—and then charged through Lone Wolf's camp. But we lost three men, and as many horses."

"And how about the scout, Shooting Star?"

"Strange to say, he had disappeared; and, since you have told your story, I begin to understand how it must have occurred. He reached the camp of the reds ahead of his pards; and, in some frantic endeavor to rescue the girl, got gobbled himself. That is plain enough. Then, his pards coming up in search of him, crawled in, cut him loose, and very likely would have secured the girl in the same way, had we not charged in just when we did."

"Well, Cap, if them three fellows are prairie pards through thick and thin, we have got to keep a sharp look-out, or they may steal in on us, and do some pretty murderous work, besides taking the captive, if Shooting Star has his eye on her."

"You are about right, Bill. And that is not all, by a great sight. Lone Wolf will no doubt follow on our trail also, for we have killed quite a number of his braves; but I don't fear his entire war-party half as much as I do those three—Shooting Star, Old Rocky, and Rattlesnake the Tonkaway—they all seem to bear charmed lives. One thing I do know. They are dead certain to follow our trail this trip, and discover our retreat. We will be forced to move out of this—I see that well enough—but I dare not risk it until I feel sure that the Apaches have pointed up country toward the Pecos."

But when that will be, who can tell? They will visit us before they do."

At this moment two rifle-shots echoed through the valley, one report quickly following upon the other, and sounding from the north and from the south. Then a series of terrific war-cries cut the air, resounding from the same points.

Devil Duke and Bill both sprung to their feet in surprise and alarm, the former exclaiming:

"By all the fiends, the red devils are here already! They have divided their force. They must have come up each side of the range, and discovered both of the entrances to the valley. Bill, run for your life, and order the men to arms!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TERRIBLE DEATH SCENE.

"For Heaven's sake, let us hasten on the trail of the bandits!" exclaimed Shooting Star, as he joined his red and white pard in the opening in the opposite the fearful cavern tomb of the Apache braves.

The young scout was nearly insane with the bitter anguish, born of the knowledge that Laura Libby was now in the power of Duke Darrow. Indeed he was far more concerned in regard to her safety now than he had been when she was in the hands of the savages; and both his pards realized that their comrade was so excited that it would be necessary to use all their influence to prevent him from sacrificing his life by a desperate dash after the new enemy that had arisen.

The usual caution and cunning which the young scout had practiced, and which had been the cause of his having become a most successful Indian-fighter, was now, so to speak, thrown to the winds—drowned in the most terrible anxiety and intense anguish which were ever present with the thought of the perilous position of the one he loved. In truth, he could scarce be reasoned with, so deaf was he to every other suggestion.

"Easy, easy, pard!" said Old Rocky, in his most soothing and assuring voice; "jist 'low this ole raw-hide ripper, what never 'vised yer wrong, ter sling a few words. 'Pears ter me yer orter see that ever'thin' air workin' hunk. Doesn't yer know that ther cut-throats o' Devil Duke hain't gut but a leetle ther start o' ther reds? An' doesn't yer see that arter ther 'Paches' skeer are over, Lone Wolf 'll be es mad es forty hungry panther-cats? Fust thin' he'll do arter his braves gits kinder cooled down 'll be ter jist glide arter Devil Duke, ter pay him off fer stompin' through his sit-out, an' sendin' some o' his best fighters ter kingdom come. 'Sides that, he's jist bound ter do his bestest ter git ther leetle gal back. Ther outlaws won't more'n git ther nags staked an' ther grub cooked, fore ther 'Pache war-cries 'll make them hump the'selves inter flin' trim; an' Devil Duke won't hev a show ter more'n take a good look at Laury, es yer calls her, fore he'll hev a fust-class ole he cut an' slash wi' Lone Wolf on his hands. We kin skute up ther range 'thout much trouble, an' foller ther trail, which hit'll be es plain es ther nose on yer face. Then, while ther skirmishin' air goin' on we kin glide in an' git ther gal easy 'nough, I reckon, 'bout losin' a ha'r. I'm inclined ter think that Devil Duke hes gut a saug place ter skute to, inebbe a cave, an' we hes gut fine work ahead. Ef Rattlesnake hadn't skeered them 'Paches, ther outlaws mought 'a' hed a show ter git up an' dust outen ther hills, an' gin us a dang'd long trail ter foller, 'sides worryin' ther gal 'bout ther death. Tonk', git yer critter, an' we'll levant. Come on, Shootin' Star, hyer's a nag fer yer what's gut bottom, an' kin shake a leg right speedy."

The young scout listened intently to every word of Old Rocky, and was forced to confess to himself that the reasonings of his more experienced and less excited pard were correct; becoming at last convinced that all had been done so far that was possible to favor them in the perilous undertaking of rescuing Laura from the hands of the merciless and murderous Devil Duke.

"God bless you, Old Rocky!" said the young scout, grasping the hand of his old friend. "And you also, my ever true pard, Rattlesnake. I would be dead now, and powerless to aid my darling, were it not for your self-sacrificing bravery and great sagacity."

Taking a lariat from the hands of the old scout, as he spoke, he advanced toward the snorting Indian pony; then securing the rope to the saddle-horn, and taking his rifle from the Tonkaway, Shooting Star vaulted upon the half-wild steed, and the trio proceeded out from the motte, keeping their animals on the edge of the rocks, and within the shadows of the same. The scouts then spurred along the north-west side for some distance, knowing the lay of the land. Old Rocky then guided his horse toward a break in the huge wall of rock, saying, as he did so:

"Boy ees, I reckon we'll meander t'other side, whar ther oaks'll kinder hide us from ther spyrin' reds. This side air too open fer ter be healthy."

As the scouts were about to turn into the

passage, or break in the hills, all brought their mustangs to a sudden halt, for the rumble of galloping steeds had suddenly struck their ears.

The old scout listened an instant, located the direction from which the sounds proceeded, and then said:

"Don't be 'larmed, pard. Hit's ther funeral what we broke up, an' ther corpses air now 'bout ter hunt ther mo'ners. That's hit. Ha! ha! ha! Dog-gone my cats, but we is havin' a heap o' fust-class XXX circuses ter-night! Ther horses wi' ther dead braves stampeded back to ther camp, an' now they is just a hump-in' ther'selves on ther trail o' Lone Wolf. Ef we was anxious ter foller the reds, all we'd hev ter do would be ter keep ther funeral in sight. But I reckon we doesn't keer ter."

All turned their steeds about, and as the old scout ceased speaking, a most fearful sight was presented to their view. The mustangs, to the backs of which had been bound the warriors slain in the dash of Devil Duke through the Apache camp, and whose interment in the cavern had been interrupted, now burst into view, coming from the camp at the creek, which, being deserted, they had dashed in a north-westerly course to join their kind. The horses were in a state of frenzy, from the fright at the cave, and at the unnatural swaying loads upon their backs.

The lances of the slain had been broken in two, one portion being bound to each limb, the other ends extending upward as high as the heads of the slain. The bodies were then secured to these, thus holding them, as well as the heads, in an upright position. A lariat was drawn tightly from one to the other of the lower ends of the lances, thus securely binding the corpses in such a life-like manner, that at a distance they might reasonably be supposed to be living warriors.

Passing within a pistol-shot of our friends, this procession of death was most horrible to witness, as the bright moon revealed every feature of it.

Some of the cords had broken during the furious stampede, causing the heads to nod from side to side, and backward and forward, as the terrified snorting mustangs sprung this way and that in a desperate effort to free themselves from their dread burdens. But still they sped onward. The hideously-painted faces, the glaring sightless eyes, the flaunting feathers, and the blood-stained forms, together with the unnatural nodding of lifeless heads in seeming mockery of death, presented the most horrible spectacle that can be conceived of.

Our trio of friends all heaved sighs of relief, as the dread cavalcade vanished around a spur of the hills; then, dashing their spurs home, they sped through the passage, turned to the right, and urged their animals north-west amid the oaks, on the course which the outlaws had just traveled.

Fortunately for the pards, they passed the point where Lone Wolf, on the opposite side of the range, divided his war-party, ordering half to cross the hills, and advance on the opposite side. Ten minutes delay would have jeopardized their lives, and changed the whole course of events; for the Apaches would most certainly have discovered them. But, luckily for them, they were well on the way toward the retreat of Devil Duke, and screened by the oaks, when the Apaches reached the western side of the hills.

When Old Rocky made up his mind that they must be in the vicinity of the outlaws' headquarters, he turned his horse toward the range, his pards following him, and soon came to a securely sheltered position, formed by a spur of rocks. Here the scouts dismounted, and secreted their animals; then they cautiously went along on foot, still on the alert for any sight or sound of either enemies.

And on went the dread cavalcade of death! The hoofs of the mustangs whisked through the tall grass, throwing out on the night air a continuous sound like that produced by the flight of ten thousand birds; broken, now and then, by the labored panting and snorts of fright, as with fast-flying hoofs the wild stampede sped up the range, like demon steeds and demon riders for a time released from Hades to scour the earth!

CHAPTER XV.

THE BANDITS ON THEIR NATIVE HEATH.

LIKE a deer ran the outlaw Bill to obey the orders of his chief, and the latter sprung up the path to the cave, his face filled with intense apprehension, as he cast lightning-like glances alternately toward the timbered entrance to the north, and the rock-bound outlet to the south, expecting each instant to see a horde of Apache avengers of blood break into view.

However, he gained the thicket which hid the mouth of his cavern, and crouched within it for some length of time, without observing, much to his surprise, any signs of the Indians, or hearing any sounds from that quarter from which so late had rung the whoops of the foe.

The men who had been posted to guard these entrances to the valley, had evidently fired their rifles, upon making the discovery, and the

bandit chief had expected that these sentinels would show themselves, and shout for assistance, but they had not done so; and this forced him to the conclusion that they had been slain.

He had not supposed that the Apaches would reach the vicinity of his cave before night, and hoped they would pass without discovering either of the entrances, or he would have divided his band equally, and posted them in such a manner that a volley or two would have forced Lone Wolf to proceed up country, without giving further trouble. But it was too late now, and Devil Duke cursed himself for having been such a fool as to be caught in such a trap.

With both entrances to the valley occupied by the Apaches—they doubtless having gained positions that were easy of defense—he felt that it would require deep cunning and strategy to save his band from complete annihilation. The situation would not have seemed to him nearly so desperate and dangerous, had not his man Bill given him the information in regard to the trio of prairie pards, who were probably now on his trail. Should these noted scouts discover his retreat, he knew that he was doomed; for they would hunt him to the death, and surmount all obstacles in their efforts to rescue the fair captive, Laura Libby.

He felt sure that Shooting Star would recognize him, should they meet, for Laura had pronounced his real name immediately upon seeing him; and should he succeed in driving away the Apaches, he still would have to contend with this famous trio, who were as cunning as foxes, and merciless enemies of him and of every outlaw in his cave, having a double incentive against him now that he had Laura Libby in his power.

The gray streaks in the east had proclaimed the coming day, some time previous to the alarm being given by the bandit sentinels, who had doubtless been, as Devil Duke had come to the conclusion, overpowered and slain. The outlaw chief had taken no precaution to mislead the Indians, for he knew that if he made detours this way and that, his band would probably be cut off from the natural fortress which they called home, and be in danger of being ambushed. He realized, from the moment that he started from the Apache camp, that the trail of his party could easily be followed, for there was a heavy dew on the luxuriant rank grass along the base of the range; consequently he had pointed directly for his retreat, but he had no idea that the Indians would reach the vicinity of the same before he should be ready to receive them.

It was sufficiently light when Devil Duke reached the thicket to distinguish the form of a man at any point within the valley; which fact, after the bandit chief had realized the true position of affairs, caused him to feel very much concerned in regard to his men being successful in joining him at the cave. Another disadvantage which caused him much anxiety, was the fact that the horses were so far removed from the cavern, that should there be a necessity for the use of the animals, it would be impossible to reach them, as the Apaches would no doubt occupy the valley. For it was now evident that the Indians had previously taken possession of the outlets, and had him and his band securely corralled; and without any chance of escape except by a bold dash through the oaks, and in such a case the Indians would have an opportunity to kill the greater part of his men, without themselves being endangered in the slightest degree, as they were beyond a doubt securely posted behind the trunks of the trees. All the plunder and extra equipments of the band were secreted in the different apartments in the cave; and, in case of extreme necessity, this itself would be a safe retreat, in which they could stand a long siege, as food was stored there in abundance, and a small stream flowed through one of the rock chambers.

Not only this, but just below the thicket which hid the mouth of the cave from view, and extending along the side of the cliff, was a natural fort, formed by a ridge of rock some five feet high, and from which the bandits could defend their stronghold in case of open attack, and without much danger to themselves.

However, Devil Duke had no fears as to being able to hold his own and punish the Apaches, should the latter attack in open day; his chief concern being on account of the cunning strategies for which Lone Wolf was noted, under the cover of the night. Knowing the vindictive character of the noted Apache marauder, the bandit chief was almost positive that the former would await for the darkness before making his grand assault, and would spend the day in studying the position, sending spies into the valley to ascertain the weak points of defense. Should these spies discover the horses during the day, he resolved to prevent the Indians from taking the animals from the valley, at any and all risks.

Previous to this occasion Devil Duke had never troubled himself with such thoughts and plans, for he had deemed his retreat secure from discovery; it being far from any traveled trails, and also from the last line of ranches on the south-west frontier. And although it was

but a short ride from Camp Verde, no scouting party from the army post had ever approached within sight of the slight break in the range since he had fixed his band there.

Gazing across the valley, the thoughts we have recorded having flashed through his mind in a moment's time, Devil Duke saw one after another of his men, their weapons ready, their forms half bent, flit cautiously from thicket to thicket along the western side of the valley; making their way through the fringe of cedars, around toward his post of observation.

They had no danger in their path, however, until they reached the point where the narrow defile led from the south plain into the valley. Here, it was clear of trees for some ten yards; and here, all felt sure that a portion of the war-party were posted, for the sentinel had fired his rifle from that station on the opposite entrance, and had not been seen since. This proved that the Indians occupied the position. At this particular point the rocks were broken, and the narrow cleft in the same through which the trail led, although only of sufficient width at the bottom to allow two horses to walk abreast was, at a little distance up, some twenty feet wider, and the shelving sides of it were here and there overgrown with cacti. Here was concealment for a number of men.

With this knowledge uppermost in their minds, the bandits all made halt at the verge of the thicket nearest to the point of danger; and, seeing nothing of the Indians, made a dash across the clear space to the opposite bunch of cedars. No sooner had they gained the center of this dangerous open, than a score of paint-daubed forms darted from among the rocks, with blood-curdling war cries, and fired a volley of arrows at short range into the midst of the bandits. Several fell. Some to rise no more. Others, to crawl, or to be dragged hastily by their comrades into the shelter of the cedars; while the sharp detonations of many rifles echoed about the cliffs, mingled with the most piercing yells of rage, agony, and death-howl.

Bearing off their wounded, the bandits rushed with frantic haste, through the bushes, and along the base of the cliff, until abreast of the cavern. Then they climbed up the rocks, urged on by the loud and imperative orders of Devil Duke, who sprung down, and led his panting followers into the natural, rock-guarded trench.

Much to the surprise of all, not an Indian was in view, and deathlike silence again ruled the rock-bound vale. The southern sun soon shone brightly down into the valley, and the wounded were carefully removed into a cool chamber of the cave, where their injuries were attended to by their comrades, in a primitive manner; others meanwhile procuring food, which was eaten by the bandits behind the barricade. A sentinel at each end kept vigilant watch all the while, although no open attack was expected; and, indeed, it would have been madness to have attempted to scale the side of the cliff under the fire of the rifles of the outlaws—a fact which the Apaches must have realized, or they would have taken advantage of the confusion that had followed their deadly volley, and made an attempt to take the cave.

Such a movement, however, would have cost them the lives of many braves, even though it might be successful, and Lone Wolf had already met with so many and such serious disasters that the fact made him more than usually cautious, and determined him upon postponing operations until the following night.

Thus four after hour passed, and no sight nor sound indicated that two hostile bodies of men were lying secreted on the borders of that beautiful valley; each with weapons in hand, and senses on the alert, to detect any movement of the other—each eager, above all else, for open war, but both being withheld by prudence. And so the long day dragged out its length.

Curses, low, deep and bitter, were breathed by the long row of desperate, crime-stamped outlaws, as they crouched behind the ridge of rock, while the sun poured down its intense heat upon them.

Although the bandit chief would have given much, at this time, to have visited the cave, in order that he might ascertain how his unhappy captive fared, he dared not even think of doing so; for the actions of his men, although guarded, showed him but too plainly that they were ripe for revolt. He saw that they fully realized the tight fix that they were in, and knew that it had been caused by his foolishness, in risking the safety of his entire command for his own selfish purposes—for nothing in the world but to possess himself of a baby-faced girl!

But he was not obliged to remain in complete ignorance of his captive's condition. One of his men brought him the welcome intelligence that Laura had recovered from her swoon, and that she was now doing well, under the care of the pretty Mexican girl.

Devil Duke dispatched this man back to his own apartment for a demijohn of whisky, which he dealt out to his band in liberal doses, as the occasion seemed to demand it; the liquor causing them to be less fearful of results and more joyous in spirit, besides being eager to

with the attack of the Apaches, although the latter greatly outnumbered them.

Devil Duke well knew that the Apache chief would lay siege to his retreat for a long time, and that he would suffer great loss before he would be willing to retreat, and to abandon the excellent chance before him of seizing such an amount of plunder and horses. Lone Wolf was no fool, and he must be well aware that he had corralled a body of whites who had been making war upon their own color, and consequently would be well supplied with blankets, guns and horse equipments—plunder that was more valuable to the Indians than aught else.

The Apaches had seen the horses of the bandits when the latter charged through their camp, and knew that they were animals that had been selected for their speed and endurance, which fact would cause them to fight like fiends for the possession of such steeds. These reasonings caused the outlaw chief to be quite anxious and to dread the coming night; but, situated as he was, there was no alternative, for it would be simply impossible to mount his men and cut his way out from the valley. Such an attempt could only be death to all. His meditations, then, could hardly be said to have been of the most cheerful character.

As the hours wore on, the men, as we have stated, made earnest efforts to "keep their spirits up by pouring spirits down," and Devil Duke was no exception to the rule.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TONKAWAY ON THE TRAIL.

It would have been impossible for men who were unaccustomed to mountain travel to have made their way over the rifts, rocks and crags which towered above and stretched between the clefts in which nestled the valley of the outlaws, and the point where the three scouts left their horses; but, difficult and dangerous as it was, Old Rocky, Shooting Star and Rattlesnake eventually "made the rattle," and soon found themselves upon the verge of the cliff above the outlaws' cave—screened securely themselves from view by stunted cedar, clumps of which grew out from the fissures here and there down the steep side of the bluff. They decided that, with the help of lariats which they had brought with them for such an emergency, they could descend to the very spot where, in plain view from their covert, they could see the line of bandits reclining behind their natural fort. They could not see the cave, nor could they form any opinion as to where it was situated, neither did they know positively that there was one; but they reasoned that the outlaws must have such a retreat, in which to store their plunder, and to shelter themselves during the prevalence of storms.

"Dog my cats!" muttered the old scout. "Pards, ef thar ain't a purty lay-out, I'm a dog-gasted ole prevaricator! Hit's dog-goned pervokin' ter lay hyer an' gaze et thet row of cut-throats. I wish I could hack off a sizey piece o' this mounting an' roll hit down onder them, an' wipe out the hull dang'd capoodle."

"Where do you suppose they have taken Laura?" asked Shooting Star, in a guarded but eager and anxious tone, his features drawn with grief and anguish from the consciousness of the great danger of her he loved, as well as his own physical suffering from his wounds and the privations through which he had passed.

"Don't fret, pard. We'll 'vestergate things," said Old Rocky. "I doesn't locate ary cave yit, but I reckon thar bees one, an' hit ain't more'n a shoot, I calkerlate, from Devil Duke's persish. I doesn't think he's thersort er gerloot ter leave room 'tween him an' his hole fer reds ter crawl 'long with any safety ter thar hides. Dang my pictur', I'd like ter know though whar thar shootin' come off what we heerd; but I hesn't bed time ter friz my peepers onder ary thing what talks biz. Tonk', what does yer make outen this outfit?"

"Heap Apaches," replied Rattlesnake, who now lay at length, his head beneath the limbs of a cedar bush, his black eyes wandering in all directions, as he studied and marked well in his mind every point below them.

"I see no Indians," said the young scout, impatiently.

Old Rocky, reluctant to admit that he was in the same fix, waited for some time before speaking, throwing his glances in every direction to discover what the Tonkaway had, judging from his speech and manner, evidently seen upon first looking from his hiding-place.

"Wa-al," broke out the old scout at last, scratching his head in perplexity, "I'm eager ter bet my shooter ag'in' a pop-gun that yer can't p'int out a 'Pache scarifyer anywhar down yander, Tonk'; but I think I kin locate thar cusses easy 'nough. Ef I should let fly a few chunks o' lead, I'm purty sartin—fact are I'm dead sure, y'd hear 'em howl, an' mebbly break bush an' show their purty pictur's."

"Bad white men not fools," asserted the Tonkaway. "Old scout think Devil Duke stay in place where no get out when long-knives come. Look," pointing to the oaks; "soldiers come that way. Bad white men go through rocks toward sunset. Soldiers find hole in rocks. Follow trail. Bad white men ride through trees

to prairie that way. Lone Wolf heap cunning. Cut war-party in two. Some braves go up thatside," pointing west; "hide in rocks. Shoot bad white men on watch. More braves ride that side hills. Hide in oaks. Bad white men now like mustangs in corral. Can't go through trees. Can't go through rocks. Trees full Apaches. Rocks full Apaches. Bad white men no got wings. Fly like birds."

"Yer hes got things sifted down fine, Tonk'; dang'd ef yer hesn't, an' yer puts solid reason wi' yer words. Hit didn't strike me fust off 'bout thar reds we see'd goin' up west; an' I reckon ye're jist kerrect 'bout thar bein' a way through the rocks ter the valley. Fact are, I knows by the persish o' Devil Duke, that he's cut off from his nags, and his usual trail is blocked up. But whar does yer think thar hosses is?"

"Mebbe so Apaches got mustangs of bad whites. Mebbe so hide in oaks. Rattlesnake no see."

"I doesn't think so, pard; fer ef they hed thar nags, they wouldn't risk thar sculps fer t'other plunder, but 'ud levant fer thar Pecos."

"Old scout talk heap good. Mebbe so mustangs in rocks."

"Who cares for their horses?" cried Shooting Star, half in anger. "I came here to save an angel girl from the brutality of a merciless monster, and what I am anxious to ascertain, is the place in which the fiend has concealed her."

"Easy, easy, pard. We-uns hain't got no way of locatin' thar leetle gal, 'ceptin' by guess-work, same es we hes thar reds; but things is liable ter pan out plainer most any minit. We-uns hes got ter lay low. Yer must hev patience, an' not kick roun' much ag'in' thar persish o' things, er yer mought spill our gravy, an' lose all our chances of ever seein' Laury ag'in. Hit's hard, hit's double distilled tortur' I lows, but hit's got ter be bored 'thout gruntin' too much. We'll study up biz 'fore night ter sarcumvent both thar white an' red heathens, er I'm a thunderin' ole fool, an' unfit ter trail up a gov'ment wagon train."

"Look on plain!" said the Tonkaway, in a quick voice, and pointing proudly toward the north entrance. "Rattlesnake talk heap good. Apaches in oaks."

Gazing in the direction thus pointed out, Old Rocky and Shooting Star saw a herd of mustangs being driven from the timber by several Apache braves, to graze upon the prairie. The old scout sent a squirt of tobacco juice afar down the cliff, with a grunt of evident satisfaction, and then said in a decided tone:

"Tonk', ye're kerrect ag'in. We hes got things squar' thet side thar range, es we hed calkerlated. Thar reds is keepin' kiver till night. Then we kin—"

"Look to the south point of the valley!" interrupted Shooting Star. "That fills the bill I believe, as you have both reasoned. I see not only the heads of two Apaches, who are peeping over the rocks, but the bodies of three men are lying outstretched upon the grass, just opposite the position which is occupied by the Indians. Can't you see them, Rocky?"

"Ye're mighty right, pard. Thar's whar thar shootin' come off, sure es yer is borned. We'd 'a' see'd thar corpuses ef we hedn't bin gazin' roun' 'mong thar brush fer reds. Thar's a split inter thar rocks thar-aways, es thar Tonk' hes said, an' hit leads ter thar south per-rarer, an' thar 'Paches hes run thar guards inter thar valley, takin' thar persish. Devil Duke are corraled, dead sure an' sartin. What shows hes they gut, Tonk'?"

"Bad whites got good fort. Got fast shootin' guns. Kill heap Apaches. Then Lone Wolf ride fast Pecos. No get squaw with sunshine hair."

"Wa-al, thet's jest 'bout how I puts hit up myself. Ef we-uns doesn't chip inter this game, an' throw our keards jist et thar proper min'nit, thar won't be no show ter git Laury outen thar scrape."

"I will save her, if I am forced to fight the brutes alone!" said the young scout decisively.

"Easy, pard; I hes told yer ter keep cool, er yer'd mix things up, an' we'll lose our ha'r, an' then thar leetle gal will be a goner fer sartin. Yer gut a cut on thar head es 'tis, an' I'd 'a' bin wiped outen this yer universe ef hit hadn't 'a' bin fer thar Tonk' last night, an' jist on 'count o' bein' too brash an' eager. This orter I'arn yer ter glide slow, an' be dead sure whar ye're goin' ter drop, 'fore yer leap."

"Your advice is good, I know, old pard; but it is hard, it is terrible to lie inactive under such circumstances. We do not know where Laura is. Even now she may be enduring worse than death."

"Devil Duke hide sun-hair squaw in rock house," asserted the Tonkaway. Rattlesnake no talk much, think a heap. "Rattlesnake go over mountains. Come back to white brothers when sun go down in plain. See, sun drop fast. When night come, plenty war-cries, plenty death-howls. Bad white men stampede."

Without further explanation, or waiting to listen to any further remarks which the white scout might wish to make, the Tonkaway crawled quickly along the rocks, the same way that they had come—toward the east.

"What in the name of reason has our red pard got in his head now?" said the young scout, in surprise mingled with vexation. "It does seem to me that we might at least try to keep together."

"Never mind thar Tonk'. His head's as level es a bilyud table. I can't understan' why he's a skutin' thet-a-way, but I'll bet my sculp he's a goin' fer some good purpus. He's gut some plan a-workin' under thar ruts o' his ha'r, which are calkerlated ter pan out a heap o' misery fer Devil Duke's crowd. I'm a gamblin' he'll stampede thar gang, an' he'll do hit some ways what we-uns wouldn't 'a' dreamed of. We never knowed him ter slep over, er ter lose his grip on ary thing he gut started on. Reckon es we-uns hes gut a lengthy time ter lay hyer, I'll take a pull at my corn-cob until thar Tonk' shows up; fer they hes gut sich a hefty job o' gazin' et each other down yunder, they won't think o' peepin' this-a-ways; 'sides thet, I don't 'low thet I'll blow out smoke enough ter start a wink in thar eye of a cottin-tailed rabbit."

Suiting the action to the word, Old Rocky filled his pipe and lay serenely smoking, but still keeping close watch of the points occupied by the outlaws and the Indians. Shooting Star kept his old position, his gaze fixed upon the bandits below, his brain filled with a thousand and one dread pictures, Laura Libby having a prominent place in each. All the self-control of the young scout was brought into requisition to keep him from stealing down the dangerous cliff and seeking to rescue the one he loved, regardless that death lurked in every step which he would be forced to take. His inactivity was torture to him, but it was a torture that he knew must be borne. And thus we leave our two friends while we set out on the trail of the Tonkaway.

When Rattlesnake had crawled a few paces from his white pards, he knew that he could not be seen by the Apaches; he then stood erect, and drawing his belt an extra hole tighter, sprung as fast as it was possible for him over and between the huge boulders along the side of the mountain range. That he was going to some particular point and for some particular purpose, was evident by his manner, and also that he was not seeking for what he wished to find with anything like uncertainty as to his success.

On, in a direct line to the base of the range he went, to where, towering above the oaks grew some half a dozen cottonwood trees. These, in a country such as that of which we write, almost invariably indicate a spring of water. When he had reached this point a decided "Ugh" of satisfaction broke from his lips, and drawing his scalping-knife, he commenced to cut quickly a number of slender rods. These he clipped and trimmed to the length of eight feet each, being about an inch in diameter.

This done, he inserted an end of each rod into the earth, the whole forming a circle about eight inches in diameter. Then he worked with a will, and gathered a pile of long, slender twigs, and these he placed within easy grasp by the side of the circle of rods, which reached higher than his head.

Casting quick glances here and there, he listened for a moment, and then, with nimble fingers, proceeded to weave the twigs in and around the circle of rods, commencing at the earth.

For some fifteen minutes did the Tonkaway work in a dexterous manner, until the rods were entirely hidden from view by the basket-work of twigs. He then pulled it from the earth, and laying the cylinder upon the sward, closed one end up with twigs in a close network. He then finished the opposite end in a similar manner, but left a small hole in the center, large enough to insert his hand, and into which he thrust a compact bunch of grass, in such a manner that it could be easily removed. With a look of intense cunning and satisfaction the Indian gazed for an instant at the mammoth basket which he had so singularly constructed; then, catching it up and shouldering it, he proceeded with long strides until he was half-way to the summit of the ridge.

The Tonkaway, who had evidently kept his eyes open when clambering over the rocky ledges toward the retreat of Devil Duke, now came to a halt by the side of a steep and yawning chasm, upon the eastern side of which the sun shone with all its southern power.

Depositing the long basket upon a rough boulder, from which it would not be liable to roll, the Indian drew two forked sticks—stout rods which he had cut among the cottonwoods—from his belt, and then cautiously descended the rough, irregular side of the chasm. He had gone but a little distance when the air was filled with a sickening odor, repulsive hisses sounded from all points, and a series of warnings from the dreaded rattlesnakes greeted the ears of their namesake.

These sights and sounds and smells, so suggestive of death in a most horrible form, were enough to have appalled the bravest and most daring heart; but the Tonkaway sprung among them with the utmost unconcern, his face show-

ing not the slightest sign of fear, and in an instant his forked stick held a monster writhing upon the rocks ere the snake could coil for a deadly spring. Placing his foot firm upon the reptile near its tail, the Indian thrust the now useless stick into his mouth, then running his right hand down the remaining rod, grasped the reptile's head between it and his fingers. This done, he quickly clutched the tail of the venomous beast in his left hand, removed his foot, and then arose, his arms outstretched, and holding the writhing, horrible serpent before him, while his muscles were strained to the very utmost to prevent the sinewy snake from coiling. Clambering up the chasm, the Tonkaway now inserted the head of the snake into the aperture which he had left in his singular basket, and by a dexterous movement thrust the reptile inside. He then closed up the hole with the wad of grass. Up and down the rocky steep the Indian now hastened until he had filled his huge basket with the venomous serpents, big and little; scores of them in number, a writhing and squirming mass of intertwined, horrible, poison-reeking rattlesnakes. Then with much difficulty, his muscles standing out in great knots with the exertion, he shouldered his repulsive burden and staggered along his rock-bound way to rejoin his white pards, as he had promised them.

As he was forced to deposit his heavy load a number of times upon some convenient boulder, in order that he might rest, it was some length of time before the Tonkaway reached the vicinity of his friends. Then, leaving the basket with its dread contents secreted in a cleft of rock, he crawled silently to the thicket of cedars, and with the most stoical features that could be imagined, resumed his former position, looking down fixedly into the valley, as if he had been absent from his post but a moment.

CHAPTER XVII.

SHOOTING STAR DISCOVERS HIS ENEMY.

BOTH Shooting Star and Old Rocky glanced quickly in their rear at the sound of the Tonkaway's approach, which was not until the latter had relieved himself of his dread burden. The white scouts both felt satisfied that their red pard had been upon an important mission, the result of which was to aid them in the attempted release of Laura Libby during the coming night; but they knew the character of their Indian friend too well to question him, although they felt the greatest curiosity in regard to his long absence. They knew that if he was forced to disclose his private plans beforehand, he would feel far less satisfaction and exultation when the same should be successfully accomplished. Besides, if he should fail, no one but himself would know in that case the strategic efforts that he had made, and consequently he would be spared some humiliation. Simply replying to his grunt of greeting with a low word of welcome, given in tones of relief and pleasure at his safe return, each once more bent his gaze upon the valley, knowing that the Indians were likely very soon to make a movement of some kind, as the sun had now disappeared below the horizon, and the shades of evening were gradually softening the rigid lines of rift, and crag, and peak, and causing the clumps of cedars to assume a dismal aspect, while beneath the branches of the same, it was already too dark to distinguish a human form even at a very little distance.

"I am not going to lie here inactive much longer," the young scout said, at length, in his old impatient manner. "The fiends of Hades could inflict no torture more agonizing and unendurable than I have suffered while waiting here!"

"We-uns knows that," said Old Rocky; "an' I'm mighty tickled ter see things 'gin ter creep towards a reg'lar ole scrimmage. Ther dark air comin' es fast es hit kin, but thar'll be a right shiney moon pop up 'fore a great while. Howsumever, thar's a few patches o' clouds what'll play inter our hands likely es not. I'd like dog-goned well ter crawl down, an' git a closter peep et things. Thar's a right sizey patch o' bush jist back half a shoot ahind ther fort o' Devil Duke's, an' hit 'pears ter me thet mought be ther bestest persish we could locate inter."

"Yes, I noticed that might be a good place for us to watch for chances," agreed Shooting Star; "and I propose we make our way down. I don't think we would be seen; and certainly not by the outlaws, who are all watching the entrances to the valley. There are but two or three abrupt breaks in the incline, and there are cedars growing at the top of each, to which we can attach lariats, lower ourselves, and leave the ropes for future use, if we are forced to retreat, although I do not intend to turn my back to the valley unless Laura is safe with me."

"I'm ready ter levant, pard, fer I've laid hyer until I'm es stiff es a wagon tongue; an' I hankers arter some information in regard ter ther leetle gal, 'bout es bad es yerself. She hes gut ter glide onder this with us, 'fore another sun shines, er I'll lose h'ar. What d'yer say, Tonk'! Does yer calkerlate we-uns kin make

ther rifle down thet-a-ways 'bout ther 'Paches freezin' ther peepers onder us?"

"Let my white brothers cut off bush, then crawl behind like turtle. Apaches no see. Lone Wolf's braves keep watch on bad whites. Watch bad whites heap."

"Thet would be a good idee, dang my cats! Pard, cut off a sizey cedar what we kin hold front o' us, an' we'll glide off easy. Reckon we-uns mought 'a' played thet game 'fore now, ef we'd think o' hit."

The white scouts each drew his knife, severed a bushy cedar from its stump, slung their rifles, and were ready for the attempt. Noticing that the Tonkaway still kept his position prone upon the rocks, the old scout turned to him and inquired:

"Ain't yer goin' ter glide 'long with us, Tonk'?"

"My white brothers will go down. Rattlesnake will watch the Apache dogs. When his war-cry sounds my white brothers will hear the bad whites howl with fear. They will jump from the rock fort. They will forget that Apache braves hunger for their blood. The cries of their chief will not be heard. Rattlesnake has said he will stampede the bad whites, and lies build not their nests on his tongue."

The Indian spoke in a low, monotonous tone, and in a manner that seemed to indicate that he had plans and resources through which he intended to accomplish much, and which he wished for the present to keep secret from them.

With a quiet chuckle Old Rocky pressed after his young pard, both knowing that it would be useless to question the Tonkaway, and both feeling confident that he had a great surprise in store for them, and which would add to his already long record of deeds of daring and strategy.

From clump to clump of cedars, the two scouts now made their way down the steep and rugged mountain side, lowering themselves by the means of lariats when necessity forced them, and in a short time they crawled into the thicket which they had made their objective point, the same being directly over the entrance to the cavern of Devil Duke.

Of this fact, however, the scouts were for some time ignorant. Congratulating themselves upon having made the trip without being discovered, as the absence of any yells had proved, they crawled to the opposite side of the clump of cedars, and were joyfully surprised to find that they were much nearer to the outlaw fort than they had imagined. They could look down into the natural trench, and observe the slightest movement of the bandits. They noticed, too, that they were on the verge of an abrupt break in the rock ledge, similar to those which they had passed in the rear; and Old Rocky secured a lariat to a stout cedar, coiling the rope and leaving it at the foot of the tree, ready to throw below, if he should see a fit opportunity to descend.

To the right of the thicket by which they were screened, they observed that the rock was quite steep, and without a break until the natural trench was reached where the bandits were posted. As this was the most favorable point to view the position of the outlaws, and also the entrance to the valley from the oak grove, the scouts posted themselves, anxiously awaiting events, and scrutinizing all points in the vain endeavor to discover an opening in the mountain side which would indicate a cave. Their anxiety in this direction, however, was soon relieved, for they saw one of the bandits cautiously crawl from the natural barricade, and directly toward their position. At first the scouts feared that they had been noticed while descending the mountain side, and that a bandit scout was now being sent to ascertain their character; but this suspicion was soon dispelled by the sudden disappearance of the outlaw, apparently into the rock just beneath them.

"Dog-gone my half-sister's black cat!"

This expression burst from the old scout in a hoarse whisper, but Shooting Star paid no attention to the words of his companion; neither did he to the sudden and vigorous squeeze with which the latter tried to draw his attention.

"Pard," said Old Rocky, "ther cave are plum under our locate, er I'm a pesky pervaricator!"

Noticing that this most important piece of information did not seem to have been heard by his pard, the old scout crawled nearer and repeated the words in the very ear of Shooting Star.

Somewhat indignant at receiving no reply, or any movement even, to show that he had heard him, Old Rocky bent his wondering gaze directly upon his pard, bending down to the rock in order to get a plainer view of his face and attitude. Much to his astonishment, he now saw that the young scout was upon his hands and knees, with his features, even in that dim light, showing ghastly as death. His eyes were fixed in a most unnatural stare upon the bandit stronghold, and seemed gleaming with ferocity and hatred, while he was as devoid of motion as if he had been carved from the solid rock that supported him.

An instant Old Rocky gazed at Shooting Star

in the utmost amazement, thinking that his pard had taken leave of his senses. The next moment these suspicions were greatly strengthened; for, with a movement like lightning, the young scout sprang to his feet, unstrung, cocked, and brought his rifle to bear upon the line of outlaws below. Notwithstanding the suddenness of these movements, the old scout instantly grasped the rifle, one hand about the nipple, and, wrenching it from Shooting Star, laid it behind him. He then clutched each wrist of his pard, holding them in a firm grasp, while he whispered in a hoarse and indignant voice:

"What in ther name o' Crockett does yer mean th-t yer opens fire on thet nest o' devils? Does yer hanker arter bein' lapped inter saddle-strings?"

"Doesn't yer keer ter save Laury? Didn't yer hear me say thet ther cave were plum under our persish? Is yer gone lunny, er what are up wi' yer?"

These words were delivered with great rapidity, and in a manner that showed the old scout was more than usually excited, besides being greatly exasperated. He knew that had Shooting Star pulled trigger, both himself and the latter would have been butchered on the spot, or riddled with bullets before they could clamber up the mount. The young man trembled in every limb, and panted with insane fury, but made no attempt to shake off the grasp of Old Rocky; still, however, keeping his face toward the line of outlaws below, and his eyes fixed upon them.

At last he turned toward his comrade, who let loose one of his hands, which the young scout immediately thrust forward, pointing downward, as in a death-like, gasping whisper, he uttered one word:

"Look!"

"Wa-al, I hes bin a-lookin' fer zome periods et them cusses. I hain't seen nothin' fresh 'bout thar looks er doin's; 'specially 'nough ter turn me inter a soft-headed fool. What in thunderation does yer friz yer peepers onder, ter stompede every dang'd bit o' hoss sense onder yer brain basket?"

"Look, I say!" repeated Shooting Star. "Do you see that man who is faced in this direction, and holding his rifle in the hollow of his arm?"

"Yas, I sees him; an' hit ain't ther fust time by a jug-full, though I hopes hit'll be the last last thet I'll see his cussed 'natomy straddle a nag. I'd like ter shet his wind off myself, but I calkerlates ter pick a time when hit won't pile my reg'lar liz. Thet are ther boss cuss o' ther lay-out—Devil Duke!"

Shooting Star shook like a leaf, as this name was spoken; then drawing his old friend nearer to him, he hissed in his ear:

"Then Devil Duke and Duke Darrow are one and the same!"

Such was the surprise of Old Rocky at this announcement, that he released his hold upon his pard, and stared down with increased excitement upon the bandit horde; while his indignation, at the mad actions of the young scout, vanished from his mind, as the great and dastardly wrongs which Shooting Star had suffered at the hands of Duke Darrow were brought vividly to his remembrance. Turning his head again, he saw that the young scout had covered his face with both hands, and was utterly convulsed with anguish; but only for a moment did the latter give way to his feelings. Hastily bracing himself, while he pressed his hands to his throbbing brain, he exclaimed, in a tone of voice most unnatural:

"Laura is lost! The dastard has killed her, but he shall die a death of torture such as Lone Wolf could not invent. Don't kill, old pard; and if you see a weapon poised or aimed at Devil Duke, shoot the owner, for my sake. We must take the fiend alive!"

"We'll do hit, ef lit kin be did, pard. I'm glad ter see yer is gittin' nat'ral-like, fer I war 'spectin' a heap o' trouble from yer. Fact are, thet red gin yer an' extry hard welt, an' yer ain't in a condish fer liz. Howsumever, I'm ready ter take my affidavit thet Laury are O. K., fer ther cusses didn't hev time ter breathe hard arter arrovin' hyer-a-ways 'fore ther reds war at 'em. Bet yer boots she air all hunk in ther cave. Ef Duke war a-goin' ter kill ther gal, he'd 'a' done fer her at Lone Wolf's camp, an' not brung'd her hyer ter risk havin' his hull lay-out busted up."

Just then the old scout sprang back with a low chuckle of delight, and grasping his pard's arm, drew him to the edge of the thicket, at the same time pointing below them, along the cedar and howler-scattered base of the cliff.

Flitting from bush to bush, and from rock to rock, were a score or more of Apaches, appearing in the dim twilight like so many demons. Feeling sure that such a movement would not be made without some action being taken to draw the attention of the bandits to some other point, Old Rocky straightened up and peered out upon the valley.

His conjecture proved to be true, for about the same number of braves were boldly marching in single file from the rock-bound entrance, diagonally across the valley to a point directly opposite the position of the outlaws. This movement would at once have awakened suspi-

cion in the minds of any men who were used to Indian warfare; but the bandits seemed to be intently watching the Apaches in their front, and making ready for a desperate resistance, while they gave no heed to their rear, probably thinking that, as the space between the barricade and the cavern was so narrow, the Indians would not dare risk themselves where they could so easily be cut off from their comrades. At this moment, another party of Apaches emerged from the oaks at the north side of the valley, and strode to meet their brother braves in the middle of it. Not a shot nor a yell had broken the silence; and while the shades of night grew more dense, the bright moon arose and illuminated the strange wild scene.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE BATTLE.

THE position of the actors in the tragic drama, in the vast natural amphitheater in which the haunt of Devil Duke was located, was terribly suggestive of wholesale death, no matter in what manner it might terminate, or who were the victors.

Every human being, without regard to the position they occupied, either in view or concealed, was determined to take an active part in the near approaching battle; consequently there was no audience, if we except the single and solitary "man in the moon" who, though he may be a "dead-head," certainly had the best seat in the house, having as well, the power to turn the gas on or off.

In order that the reader may the better understand the situation, and be able to jump at results far better than those who were concerned, we will say that the larger force of Apaches on the open moonlit valley, could not possibly mount the rocky ridge which arose in their front, a pistol-shot from the long and narrow natural fort which was held by Devil Duke and his band. In climbing this acclivity, they would be open to a galling fire from the outlaws, and those of them who might be fortunate enough to reach the top, could easily be cut to pieces when scaling the five feet solid wall of rock, behind which the outlaws crouched.

This fact, if Devil Duke had spent a moment in reasoning, would have shown the bandit chief that, as they had had the benefit of studying the Indian's stronghold by daylight, he had no cause to think the wily Lone Wolf would attempt an assault, and that the only point of real danger was in the rear. This thought, however, had not entered Devil Duke's mind, as was proved by the entire attention of his band being directed toward the mass of Apaches on the moonlit plain. Perhaps, however, the narrow space between the fort and the cavern, which was very difficult to reach from the south, and the ignorance of the outlaws as to the number of Indians that had followed their trail, was sufficient excuse for their not giving any attention to the sides of the cliff.

No doubt Devil Duke felt positive that all of Lone Wolf's warriors were in plain view in the valley and he laughed in his sleeve, if not openly, at the seemingly easy victory that was before him.

Old Rocky and Shooting Star crouched above the mouth of the cavern in the cedars, watching the Apache braves most intently, who were now cautiously and slowly drawing near the scout's point of observation and the rear of the long line of outlaws, who, gazing out upon the plain, were at the mercy of a score of warriors who would soon pour a volley into their backs.

The scouts appeared not to think of their absent pard, the Tonkaway, or if they did, felt sure that he was working out his plan, which however seemed about to be frustrated by the approach of those who would take the stampeding business out of his hands.

That Shooting Star was annoyed and disappointed at the approach of those who might steal his revenge from him, was evident; but Old Rocky was greatly pleased, and whispered, with a satisfied air:

"Dang my cats, pard, don't be sot down over not corralin' Devil Duke. He'll never be wiped out by a red he'thin; an' ther painted cusses crawlin' up thar 'll start a row what 'll gi'n us a show ter step down an' skute inter ther cave. Keep cool, my brave boy, an' lay fer chances."

They were not destined to wait long, however, for as the old scout closed his remarks one of the advance braves drew bow and let fly an arrow skyward. To it was attached a fluttering rag, which could easily be seen by the Apache warriors on the plain.

This was doubtless a signal, and was not observed by the outlaws, and indeed it could not be, for the shaft, after reaching a good altitude and having lost the force of the bow, fell down on the same track, and dropped at the feet of the brave who had so dexterously sent it on its important mission.

"Git ready fer biz, pard," whispered the old scout to Shooting Star, "fer ther big fandango are about ter commence. Yer'll hear hefty ole he music afore yer kin load yer six, er I'm a perva. catin' pirut."

Not a moment had elapsed after the Apache had returned his recovered arrow to its quiver, when, in a long double line, the Indians under Lone Wolf rushed over the plain toward the mount, and the wild war-cries of the red-men of the Pecos rung and echoed from crag to crag and from cliff to cliff, echoing and re-echoing the signal of mad carnage.

At this instant the Apaches, from cedar clump and bowlder, rushed up from the south to pour their terrible war-shafts into the backs of the outlaws, whose whole attention was now centered upon the yelling horde at the base of the mount. The utter annihilation of the band of Devil Duke now seemed certain; but, just as the fierce painted warriors reached the rocks opposite the cavern, and were fitting their arrows to their bows, a fusilade of revolver-shots from the mouth of the cave was poured into their ranks, and for a moment confused and demoralized them.

The shots in the rear of the outlaw chief, as a matter of course, drew his attention. In an instant he saw his mistake and yelled in thunder tones:

"Reds in our rear, boys! Right about! Fire!"

This movement was executed so quickly by the bandits that, before the Apaches had recovered from their surprise at the attack upon their rear, and before scarcely a bow could be bent, a hurtling rain of leaden balls cut them down in numbers, many of them falling forward upon their bended bows.

Fierce yells, moans of agony, howls of death, and ringing cheers, mingled with the war-cries of the Apaches below, who could not see that their fellow-braves above them had been shot down before an arrow from their bows had cut the air.

Fully one-half of the Apache war-party lay dead or dying upon the rocks, while the survivors rushed back to cover among the rocks and cedars they had so recently left filled with such glowing and reliant thoughts of victory, honors and spoils.

The bandits, seeing they had secured their rear from attack, now quickly turned and sent a rattling fusilade from their revolvers down upon the Indians, who, under the leadership of Lone Wolf, were now scaling the cliff in a long and scattering line.

At this moment Old Rocky and Shooting Star, who had descended by means of their lariats, and were with their rifles ready about to enter the cave, were suddenly brought to a halt in surprise by seeing their pard, Rattlesnake, making his way to a steep decline, at the foot of which was the fort of Devil Duke.

The Tonkaway bore a most singular structure in his arms, which seemed, to judge from his manner of walking, to be very heavy. It was this strange fact which caused the scouts to pause in wonder when on a most important mission; and remembering the threat or promise of their red pard to stampede the outlaws, they sprung back to observe his movements.

At the top of the steep incline, Rattlesnake carefully placed this singular object; then, giving the sounding war-cry of his tribe in so piercing a manner that the attention of the bandits was again directed toward their rear, he sent the strange cylinder rolling down into their very midst. That the war-cry of the Tonkaway startled them was plain to be seen; that the sight of a single enemy amused them, was positive. This last feeling was doubled by the singular attack; but, as the long roller rushed into the trench before them, and then burst, its writhing twigs flying in all directions, and disclosing a mass of maddened rattlesnakes, that quirmed, and crawled, and hissed, and filled the air with their death warning, then, with cries of horror the appalled outlaws darted in every direction, many of them springing over the wall of rock upon the very knives of the warriors of Lone Wolf, who had just reached the barrier in his advance upon Devil Duke.

The two scouts waited to see no more, but rushed into the cave, the war-cry of Rattlesnake once more sounding in their ears, as he dashed down among the demoralized outlaws, who were springing in a scattered manner to the cover of bowlder and cedar. Puzzled at these singular actions of the whites, the Apaches sealed the wall, sprung over the natural trench, and bounded in all directions after the flying outlaws. The latter, in couples and threes, at last came to halt in different sheltered positions, and from cover poured into the Apaches a most murderous fire, many of the braves falling before it. Eventually, however, they were annihilated to a man. At the recall yell of Lone Wolf, that chief found that half of his braves had "gone on the long dark trail," or were missing; and a search for the wounded was ordered, as well as for the horses, and to discover the stronghold and store-house of the bad whites.

At the first discovery of the cave, for Lone Wolf knew that there must be one, a signal yell was to be given by the finder, and he was to receive a reward of five horses, a similar number being given to the brave who should find the hidden corral.

The absence of any animals had been a deep

mystery to the Apaches, but they resolved to find them before they left the valley, as the fine stock of the bad whites had been the main object that Lone Wolf had in view when he ordered the pursuit; although the "Sun Hair" had made a deep impression on the mind of the hideous chief, and he hoped to find her, knowing in fact that she must be in the valley.

It was a horrid and ghoulisn sight—that steep hill-side lit up by the bright silver moon, which now rode majestically in mid-heavens. Here and there some brave tore off the reeking scalp of an outlaw, waved it over his head, and gave an unearthly yell of exultation and victory. Others, with howls, lifted their dead, and bore them slowly down to the plain, giving utterance, as they went along, to the monotonous death chant of the Apaches. Others carried the wounded to the valley, and ministered to their wants, as best they could; but many among them lay, their painted faces upturned to the moon, chanting their own death songs, and passing, with the death yell on their lips, on the "long dark trail."

Hell cannot hold forms more fiendish than Apache braves when on the war-path; and it only needed scathing flames to lap their tongues from cleft and chasm and crack, to make the view a veritable Hades. But, for all that, the moon looked down as bright and serene, and smilingly, as if upon an earthly Paradise.

CHAPTER XIX.

LOVE STRONGER THAN DEATH.

WE left our friends, Old Rocky and Shooting Star, at the entrance of the cavern of Devil Duke, and, as the reader knows that the Apaches had been fired upon from this point—a fact, which, as a matter of course, was also known to the scouts—the latter proceeded with great caution, their rifles held ready.

To their surprise they saw that a small fire was burning around a bend, or in an alcove; but this was not until they had proceeded unmolested for at least fifty yards from the entrance. The grand arched passage, at first so small, took a curve to the right, upon reaching the distance of but a few yards from the outer world.

As we have said, the scouts discovered a small fire; but, at the very moment that the blaze met their view, the sharp crack of a rifle rung and reverberated through the passage of the cave, and a bullet grazed the ear of the old scout, who brought his weapon to his shoulder on the instant, as did his companion; but both as quickly lowered their rifles without pulling trigger, while the young man passed his weapon to Old Rocky, and sprung with the quickness of thought, toward the fire.

"Wa-al, I'll jst be eternally flusterated," said the old scout, as he felt of his ear; "ef I ain't reg'lar senal'd—ear-marked fer life—an' hit war done by es purty a piece o' caliker, es I bes see'd fer many a long moon. Reckon we bes struck a senorita semernary what Devil Duke bes instertooted this-a-ways, jest ter take ther cuss offen his deviltry, er ter add more enter hit, one er t'other."

The occasion of these remarks, and also of the strange action of Shooting Star, was, that, as both were about to fire upon the rather indistinctly outlined human form who had held the rifle that "senaled" Old Rocky, both discovered that it was a gaudily-attired Mexican girl who, as the reader must have decided, was Ponita, the favorite, if not the only female companion of the bandit chief.

Quick as was the movement of the young scout, the Mexican girl was quite as fleet of foot, and ere the young scout had gotten within ten feet of her, she sprung through an open doorway, and slammed the heavy oaken door in his face; the young man in his eagerness, throwing himself heavily against it—so heavily in fact that he was bruised and almost stunned.

At this moment, Old Rocky rushed to the spot, and a silvery, but taunting laugh, greeted the ears of both.

"Dang my cats, pard! Why didn't yer corral her? Hit's a dead sure fact that she bes gut yer leetle gal in thar, an' we bes been dishd by a kaliker-kivered human, 'sides her lead fell in love with my ear, an' I'd gi'n a good ridin' nag ter squeeze a leetle er ther devil outen her purty carkiss. I c'd put a Comanch' split onder each o' her hearers with a relish; kase why, I'll git ther laff onder me fer 'lowin' a Greaser gal ter shave a piece o' meat off, no matter ef hit ain't no bigger nor a jay bird's tongue."

"Don't talk so much, Old Rocky; but, for God's sake, let us get torches and search for something to break down that door, or the she devil may murder Laura. I feel, in my heart, that it is as you say; she is inside this apartment."

"But we doesn't want ter break down ther door, pard; hit's goin' ter be our bestest bolt—that door—fer we'll hev a hull capoodle o' Lone Wolf's scarifiers jst a-whoopin' fer our best bleed afore a couple o' hours. Take yer gun, an' stan' ready ter stick hit inter ther crack, er make a loss pull when she opens. Fust off—though I hate ter do hit—we bes ter kick tlet fire out. Hit'll be es dark es Tophit hyer, but

we is playin' a desp'rit' game. Wonder whar ther Tonk' air now? He'd come in mighty handy like."

"But she will not open the door. What idea have you in your head now? Time is precious, and I'm getting faint with fasting and anxiety, to say nothing of my wound. Old pard, I'm losing strength."

"Never flop over ontill yer is bored clean through. I'll make her open ther door; bet yer boots."

He said this in a low tone of voice, and then proceeded to kick out the fire, while Shooting Star kept his position that he might be able to guide his pard back through the darkness by signals.

Old Rocky soon returned and stood by the door.

"Less listen a minit," proposed the old scout. "I kinder reckon we kin hear somethin' what 'll show us how things aire a-goin' on inside."

"I have been listening, and I hear voices, but they seem to be some distance away. This must be a large cave chamber, or else there is another beyond it, and connected with it. What do you think about it? And what do you propose to do?"

"Wa-al, hit hes struck me thet ther highfer-lutin' gal what clipt my lis'nin' apperatus air soft on Devil Duke, an' ther cuss hes left her ter guard Laury. Ther fightin' air still on ther whiz outside, an' none on 'em air very likely ter drop in on us yit, er hear our barkers. We-uns kin fire a few shots, an' ther Mex gal air sure ter hear 'em, an' then we'll pound ther door an' yell. She'll come lively, er I'm fooled; an' yer kin jist everlastin'ly sling gab at her chuck full o' cuss words an' prussic acid slang, orderin' o' her ter open ther door, as Devil Duke hes gut shot bad an' ther reeds is jist a-hummin' this-aways. Ef thet don't make ther rifle, I'm ready ter chaw prickly pears fer a livin' fer ther nex' six moons. Now, what yer think o' my lay-out?"

"It is a good plan," said Shooting Star, more hopefully, "and one that I never should have thought of. You are no end of a strategist, old pard."

"Dog my cats! Don't never call me sich a name es thet agin', pard. Hit don't fit me, But git ready fer biz. Pull shooter an' let her whiz."

Three shots, fired by each of the scouts from their revolvers, quickly followed the words of old Rocky, and they sounded in the vaulted cavern, with its many echoes, like the rattling, scattered fire of a brigade of infantry. They then both began pounding upon the open door with their rifles, Shooting Star meanwhile yelling and cursing like a pirate.

"Open! Open! We have the chief here badly shot, and the red devils are hot after us! Open for Devil Duke."

Barely were the last words spoken when the heavy door swung inward quickly, and both scouts bounded inside, turned, shut and secured it. The action scarce occupied more than an instant, but both saw the Mexican girl whirl rapidly, draw her stiletto, and fly toward an adjoining apartment. This was illuminated, as could be seen through an open door similar to the one they had just passed. But this time the scouts were determined not to be foiled, and both went like the wind in close pursuit of the gaudily-attired beauty. Seeing, by a look over her shoulder, that she could not pass and close the door, Bonita kept onward without diminishing her speed, and, with upraised steel in her right hand, her red sash, gay ribbons and midnight hair flying behind her, made directly toward the opposite side of the cave chamber. There, to the horror of those who were in search of her, stood the beautiful captive, Laura Libby.

The scouts saw, at a glance, that she was bound fast to one of the foot-posts of an iron bedstead. Her face was pale as death, and her golden hair hung down, half shrouding her form. As the maddened girl darted forward, the captive's lips were seen to move in prayer, her eyes to become fixed in horror, and her form to tremble in every limb. She seemed not to perceive that her friends were near her; to see naught but that female fiend, whose blazing eyes, clinched white teeth, from which the red lips curled away like those of a wild beast at bay, and lifted steel, proclaimed a sudden release from all her troubles.

Shooting Star's very soul was in his eyes, his brain bursting with horror, and his heart in his throat. Had he suffered tortures for years, from being deprived of a sight of the angel form that was dearer to him than life, and for whom he would gladly suffer the agonies of the stake, to relieve from one pang of pain or sorrow, and was it all to be of no avail now? No! a thousand times, no!

The young scout bounded into the air, and came to his feet in a way to stop his great momentum; his form became as rigid as iron, and he stood like a statue carved in stone, with his right arm outstretched, and hand gripping as in a vise, his deadly six. Everything with him, and for him, now depended upon the glance of an eye. The failure of his weapon, or of his aim, would plunge him for the remainder of his days into a hell of misery and torture not to be described.

Not three feet intervened between the two maidens—the assassin and the one whom he so worshiped—when he formed the desperate resolve to kill a woman. One instant, and the vast chamber rung with an awful report, and Bonita the Mexican girl fell prone at the feet of her intended victim, her stiletto being shattered against the rock floor of the cave. That moment, Laura Libby, all bound as she was, fell fainting forward, like a flower from its stalk, her long golden hair veiling the dying gasps of Bonita from view!

The arm of Shooting Star fell to his side, as soon as the ball left the muzzle of his revolver, and he fell senseless. The blow upon his head, which he had received from Lone Wolf, privation from food and sleep, loss of blood, and untold anxiety and anguish of mind, were more than any man could endure, even though his heart and brain and nerves were of adamant. Old Rocky, for the first time, stood paralyzed. With such a closing tableau of a tragedy before him, he was in such a position as he never before imagined. Muttering:

"Dog-gone my cats!" he sat down, laid his rifle across his knees, pulled his old greasy sombrero over his eyes, and wept like a child.

Not long, however, did the old hero sit thus, for he remembered that the one to whom he was so strongly attached lay senseless, and an angel girl also; the latter being bound, and in a torturing position.

With such thoughts, his humane feelings prompted him to immediate action; and, leaving his rifle on the floor by the side of his sombrero, he drew his bowie, and advancing to the side of Laura, severed her bonds on the instant, raised her up, and supported her in his arms.

Perhaps the old man was never before, in all his life, in just such an embarrassing position, and doubtless, had there been conscious witnesses he would have blushed like a girl.

Even under the distressing and tragic circumstances, it is much to be feared that a witness would have been forced to smile at the awkward manner, and peculiar expression of countenance of the old scout, as he tenderly lifted his beautiful burden, and laid her upon the couch. But these feelings seemed to forsake him as soon as he had safely deposited the fainting girl; for a look of reverence that almost refined it, came over the hard features of the old hero, as he gently removed the heavy mass of hair from the maiden's face, and then placed her arms in an easy and natural position, with her hands on her breast. This done, Old Rocky smoothed down the riding-skirt, torn and tattered as it was, and stood for some seconds, gazing at her, and seemingly forgetful of his other surroundings—even of the fact that his most intimate friend was now lying near him, devoid of sense and motion.

Soon, however, the old man's thoughts reverted to his pard, and he rushed about, seeking for water; this he found, and some wine also, in a cabinet on the opposite side of the apartment. Then returning to the bedside, he bathed the head of the unconscious girl, and poured a small quantity of wine between her parted lips; repeating the treatment until she partly turned, and gave utterance to some low moans. It may have been that our old hero hardly considered his rough appearance as likely to be reassuring to Laura when she opened her eyes; for he left the side of her couch, and went to work in a more systematic and unembarrassed manner upon his young friend, who, in a little time revived, and with a heavy moan gazed in a strangely vacant and anguished way into the troubled face of his old pard.

Raising the young scout to a sitting posture, Old Rocky proceeded to pour a very liberal dose of wine down his throat, saying:

"Pard, things is all hunk; an' yer needn't ter worry no more arter this. Yer made a crack-shot, jist at the right second. I'll sw'ar I war so flustered that, ef I'd 'a' fired, I'm dead sure I'd 'a' shot my own head off. 'Cos why, hit war caliker. I'll 'low that hit war 'bout ther cusseddest piece yer could skeer up outside o' a 'Pache squaw; I never see'd nothin' like hit in all my time, but es I said afore I war flustered. I hes tuck keer o' yer leetle gal: an' I feels thet I'm a dang'd sight better fer hit. I'll think a heap more o' myself allers hyer arter jist fer bevin' caught her in these hyer ole arms. Hit's a fact. Yer 'pears wild, pard, but I'll fotch yer roun' ter biz."

Setting the bottle of wine upon the floor, Old Rocky, with a quite perceptible moisture in his eyes at the sight of the half-insane state of Shooting Star, raised the latter to his feet, and supporting him as well as he could, led or rather forced him gently toward Laura Libby's couch.

The young man moved listlessly, and as if in a state of somnambulism past the prostrate form of Bonita, without apparently noticing the sad sight; though his head was bent forward, and his eyes fixed only upon the rock floor of the cavern.

As they approached the head of the bed on which the released captive reclined, Laura opened her eyes, with a look of horror in their liquid depths, which, however, changed at once

to one of heavenly joyousness, as she raised herself to a sitting posture, with the stifled cry of, "Charles Audley! My dear Charles!" upon her lips.

Had an electric shock been suddenly administered to the young man, he could not have straightened up more quickly. As his eyes met those of Laura, he sprang, with a wild cry of mingled relief and joy toward the bed; then the arms of the long sundered pair were wound about each other, and the golden hair of the beautiful girl seemed to cling lovingly about his shoulders, as he held her to his breast, and rained kisses madly upon brow, and cheek, and lip.

"Dog-gone my skin! Jumpin' Jericho!" cried the old scout, and he whirled in his tracks, darted back to where he had left the wine bottle, and raising it to his lips, drained the contents. He then grasped his rifle, and sprang from the chamber and through the outer door, through which they had gained entrance, listening intently for any indication that might point to fresh danger.

Dear reader, as you and we know in our hearts that those two long-separated, long-suffering lovers could not express a tithe of their joy at a meeting, even under such dread circumstances as have been described, we will refrain from making any attempt to give their words, much less to portray their feelings, but leave them for a brief space to silent, or whispered bliss, while we glide from the cave of the outlaw band, to follow another trail in the outer world.

CHAPTER XX.

THE OUTLAW CHIEF SUCCUMBS.

It will be remembered that Old Rocky and Shooting Star, as the shades of evening were beginning to envelop the earth, started down the mountain side for the purpose of securing a position near to the outlaw fort, and that Rattlesnake remained behind in the cedar motte, from which he had watched the valley during the greater part of the long day that was now closing.

The Tonkaway lay prone upon the earth, his snake-like eyes wandering here and there, as he studied every tree and rock below him, as well as every object in the valley, and among the surrounding crags.

Thus he lay for some time after the departure of his white pards; but at length he sprang erect, stalked on the back trail, and getting his "infernal machine" in his arms, commenced what was, with his burden, a most difficult, tedious, and somewhat dangerous descent of the mount, by the same route which his friends had taken but a little time previous. He arrived at the same clump of cedars in which they were concealed, and depositing his cargo on the upper side, stole in to take a view of matters; without, however, disclosing his presence to the scouts.

It was while thus stationed that he witnessed the strange conduct of Shooting Star, when the latter recognized in Devil Duke his old and most implacable enemy, Duke Darrow. When the young scout was about to fire on the bandit chief, the Tonkaway was on the point of springing forward and preventing it, when he saw that Old Rocky was proving himself to be quite equal to the occasion.

Rattlesnake had mingled enough with the whites, and with the two before him in particular, to understand by their words and manner that Devil Duke had been for a long time the greatest foe of the young scout, and that the latter had sworn to have revenge. He also understood, from the words that Shooting Star let fall, that it was a matter of great importance to him that Devil Duke should be captured alive.

The Tonkaway decided in his mind naturally that his white pard wished to torture his enemy, and as this agreed so thoroughly with his own custom, or the custom of his tribe, he thought more highly of his young friend, if possible, than ever before, in consequence.

Digesting all this in his mind, and knowing that the two scouts were first bound to inspect the cave and save Sun Hair, he resolved to take upon himself the duty of capturing the outlaw chief at any cost.

Having made this resolution he proceeded, as we have shown, after the route of the Apaches from the south pass, to hurl the cylindrical basket, which he had filled with his namesakes, down in the very midst of the outlaws, and, by his single efforts, changing the whole tide of battle, and thus insuring the destruction of the entire band of bad whites by his own personal cunning, unaided and unseconded.

Having kept his word to his fellow scouts to stampede the outlaw band, his every sense and nerve were now concentrated upon the capture of the bandit chief, and, in the wild melee which followed the advent of his most terrible and novel engine of war—his primitive torpedo, if we may be allowed so to designate it—the Tonkaway sprang like a deer after the outlaw chief, who, in the confusion, knowing it to be useless to cross the clear space in the attempt to reach his cavern retreat, dashed to the north, from rock to rock, and from thicket to thicket,

directly toward the large oaks which grew in the natural gateway to the valley.

As all the Apaches under Lone Wolf now scaled the rock wall of the outlaw fort at its southern extremity, and the bandits, by chance or intent, all sprung for the more dense of the cedar motives to the south, none saw the wily chief, Devil Duke, except our red friend the Tonkaway.

Grasping, by a dexterous movement that was quick as a lightning stroke, the neck of a huge rattlesnake in each hand, just as the serpents had coiled to spring upon him, the Indian leaped through the now deserted fort, the deadly serpents writhing, coiling and thrashing with madness. A sight more suggestive of diabolical warfare cannot be imagined.

On, on, sped Devil Duke, knowing full well that his hand had been cut to pieces, and that his one hope now lay in gaining his racer—a horse that, were he once upon its back, he could laugh at Lone Wolf and his braves, even were they all mounted upon their fleetest mustangs and within a hundred yards of him. But, to do this he must circle the valley beneath the oaks at its entrance, and work his way through the pines and dense cacti which grew thick along the western base of the mountains that formed the wall on three sides.

Full well did the bandit chief know, by the war-cry of the Tonkaway, that it was he who had performed the *coup de grace* which had brought ruin and annihilation upon his band, and he also knew full well that Old Rocky and Shooting Star could not be far distant, though but little did he think that the latter had recognized him as Duke Darrow, and that once that night, upon the impulse of the moment, and thinking only of his great wrongs, he had been on the point of ridding the world of him, at any cost.

Dashing through the oaks, not far from where the Apaches had stationed a small party before the fight, Devil Duke felt that he had now a fair prospect of escape, for he saw no longer any sign of the Indian foemen, and he knew by the yells and sounds of battle that all of Lone Wolf's braves were on the east side of the valley near to the cave.

The bandit chief had a short run from the oaks to the pines that was entirely clear of tree or bush; but he felt no fears of discovery from the scene of conflict from which he had so completely withdrawn.

He had crossed one-half of this open space, being in the bright moonlight; when, suddenly from his rear he heard a loud and not unfamiliar whoop, which caused him to turn and look backward.

As he looked toward the oaks, from which he had just bounded, he saw a writhing and singular object come whirling through the air with great velocity, and ere he could spring aside, it had struck him full upon the back and neck.

That it was a serpent, Devil Duke knew in an instant; for, as the cold, repulsive, and horrible thing struck him, it writhed about his face. At once remembering the sudden appearance of such a number of them in his stronghold, he was able in an instant to classify it; nor could he in any event have remained long in doubt on the subject, for the quivering of the reptile with madness caused its rattles to vibrate in his ear.

One yell of horror and deadly fear escaped him, as he fought the venomous beast with his bowie-knife, cutting it loose without its fearful fangs having pierced his skin; and then, with a shriek of terror, he sprang onward, knowing full well who it was that was upon his trail, although no human being was in sight. On flew the once dreaded outlaw chief, casting back glances of horror and fear, his face ghastly, his weapon in his hands, his hat gone, and his long hair flying in the breeze.

He realized now that he had but one chance in a hundred for escape; although he had as yet caught no sight of the terrible Tonkaway. On he went, tearing wildly through the trees, until at last, panting and exhausted, he darted seemingly into a rift in the wall of the mountain side, where he breathed more freely, and shortened his pace, for he was now in the secret entrance to his rock-bound corral, in which the horses of his band were kept.

The passage in which he was, led in a winding way for some ten yards; it being just wide enough for a single horseman to ride freely, while its sides were rough, jagged, and broken.

Devil Duke soon emerged into a little valley, not more than three or four acres in extent, where at least fifty fine horses were staked to picket pins. The outlaw chief gave a peculiar whistle, and after waiting some seconds for answer, repeated his signal, but received no response.

"Curse them!" he muttered between his grating teeth. "They have sealed the mountain and levanted. I am all alone—that seems certain—but, once upon El Negro, and I'll defy even that accursed Tonkaway. Ye gods, what a terrible devil that Rattlesnake is! Who, the fiends, could think of facing him and his infernal mode of warfare? My band is broken up—that is evident—and I must go it alone;

but once upon my noble steed, and Devil Duke will fly like an arrow from the bow toward the Rio Grande. There I can join Cortina, and revel, to my heart's content, in vengeance upon my own countrymen. I can do it, and I will!"

Making his way among the horses as he spoke, he soon reached a superb black stallion that whinnied at his approach, as if it knew by his coming that it was soon to gallop free from that silent, rock-bound vale. But, at this very moment, could Devil Duke have looked through the natural wall at his back, he would have seen the bronzed and massive form of the one whom he most dreaded. The Tonkaway, his eagle-feathers flaunting proudly as he stalked along the trail to the secret passage, was on time. The hunted outlaw was in the hand of the terrible chief, who had accomplished more that night than a score of men could have done. And could he, of whom the Indian was in pursuit, have seen him, he would have seen besides another rattlesnake, the sight of which would have caused him to abandon all hope, brave and daring though he was even to the extreme of recklessness.

The bandit chief pulled up the picket-pin, severed the lariat in twain, and then running a twist about the under jaw of the horse, sprung upon its back; still, however, grasping knife and revolver in his hands.

Devil Duke urged his truly noble steed through the other animals, as they grazed, and again entered the winding passage, intending, as he reached its other extremity, to gallop down the open valley at full speed, pass through the oaks, and from thence dash down the range toward the Rio Hondo.

But in his case, as always, man proposes. He had passed not more than three-fourth of the distance, when a dark object sprung from a cleft in the rock, a heavy body struck upon his horse behind, causing the animal to rear and snort wildly; at the same instant, a bronzed arm encircled his waist from the left side, a bronzed hand was thrust under his right arm, and as the horse sprung into the moonlight, the outlaw saw the hissing head of a rattlesnake within four inches of his eyes, while he felt the cold, slimy coils wind about his neck.

With one terrible cry of deathly horror, Devil Duke dropped both knife and revolver, and reeled to the left, falling limp across the arm of the Tonkaway chief, just as the affrighted horse, with snorts of terror, its eyes glaring like coals of fire, sped in most terrific bounds directly into the Apache camp.

Right through the very midst of the dumfounded Apache braves, over the dead and wounded, crashing its hoofs with sickening sound through flesh and bone, went the black steed; the Indians flying in superstitious terror to the right and the left, until, when within ten feet of Lone Wolf, the Tonkaway hurled the huge rattlesnake full in the face of the Apache chief. Then sounding, in piercing tones, the war-cry of his tribe, in the wildest triumph and exultation, Rattlesnake flew over the valley like the wind, and was lost to view amid the oaks.

So sudden and unexpected had been the advent of the magnificent horse, with its strange double load, the one red and alive, the other white and to all appearance dead, and seemingly bursting forth from the solid rock, with the writhing snake upheld in air, that not a shot was fired, and every Apache shrunk within himself in superstitious dread, all believing that the flying trio belonged to the regions of the bad spirits; all, except Lone Wolf, who recognized by the "totem," so contemptuously flung in his face, and also by the well-known war-cry, one who lived upon earth, and who was his most feared and hated foe.

There was no human being whom Lone Wolf hated, and yet feared, more than the Tonkaway chief, the renegade red; and he now swore hotly in the Spanish tongue, at the thought of his having been thus braved and insulted by him, and that, too, among a war-party of his own people. His worst enemy had ridden through his camp alone, taunting him in the most open and aggravating manner, and had been permitted to escape without even a shot being fired in pursuit of him. Not only this, but the Apache chief had seen that the Tonkaway rode upon El Negro, the much coveted horse of the bandit chief, and that he held Devil Duke a captive; for Lone Wolf, by one glance, saw that the outlaw was not dead.

Rattlesnake galloped through the oaks, turned down the range, entered a notch by the side of the steep mountain, and bringing the steed to a halt, secured him to a tree. He then bound the hands of the bandit chief, having brought him back to a sense of his condition by a few judiciously disposed pricks with his scalping-knife, and forced him to begin the ascent of the mount in advance of him.

In about an hour the Tonkaway had his captive gagged and tied to one of the cedars in the notch, just over the entrance to the cave which had been for so long a time the retreat of Devil Duke and the theater of his revelries. Here Rattlesnake bound him beyond the possibility of an escape, at the very point where Shooting Star had stood when he first recognized in the

chief of the outlaw band Duke Darrow, his most unscrupulous and fiendish enemy. The Tonkaway had kept his promise in the spirit, and to the letter. The hour of retribution, which now and then comes in this world, had arrived for Devil Duke!

CHAPTER XXI.

STAMPEDE OF THE DEAD.

WHEN Rattlesnake, mounted upon El Negro, and with the senseless form of Devil Duke in his arms, charged through the massed Apaches, they were preparing for the burial of their dead, and no sooner had the Tonkaway vanished beneath the oaks than Lone Wolf, furious at the audacity of the renegade and at the insult which the latter had thrust upon him, ordered the ceremony to proceed at once. This he did to hide, as far as possible, his humiliation. He stalked about among his braves, berating and cursing them for not barring the way of the Tonkaway and shooting him down, by so doing gaining for themselves two additional scalps, and for their chief a horse fit for him to ride. He knew that it would be useless to follow Rattlesnake, mounted as the latter was, but he felt sure in his own mind that the renegade red would turn up again.

Stung to the quick by the hurling of the snake in his face, he was eager for revenge, but he was also anxious to show his braves that he did not feel it as an insult, consequently by speech and manner he studied to keep their minds employed.

Directing the work in person, he had all the dead placed in such a manner as to cover a circular space of sward in shape of the moon at its full, the feet being all together in the center, and the heads at the outer surface.

This done, Lone Wolf led off, followed in single file by his braves until a circle was formed around the dead. The remaining and less noted warriors formed another and a larger circle outside the first, and then Lone Wolf drew his knife, which was the signal for the death-dance.

Round and round went the paint-daubed, feather-bedizened Apaches, in what was at first a silent dance, a spasmodic hop this way and that, while all were gesticulating toward the dead, and shaking scalps toward them, as if to signify that although dead they had died on the war-path, with arms in their hands, and would go to the happy hunting-grounds beyond the moon, these wild and grotesque gestures being directed alternately toward the dead and the shining luminary above them.

For a time this silent—and more horrible from being silent—dance proceeded. Then Lone Wolf gave a long-drawn howl, which was echoed by the braves, and the dance with its accompanying gestures became slower and less animated. The scalps were replaced in their belts, and the valley resounded, for some five minutes, with a chorus of blood-curdling howls. Then each brave drew his weapons, and the dance grew faster and faster, while from every throat rung the Apache war-cry, almost enough in itself to awaken the dead. Weapons cut the air in every direction, the inner circle of warriors going one way in their wild dance, and the outer circle the other; then both gesticulated toward the dead, to show that they meant to avenge them. At a signal, the war-cries that had been given in concert ceased; then Lone Wolf sounded singly, then the next brave to him, and each repeating and going round the circle, until all were yelling like fiends let loose from Gehenna, still dancing, and flying around the dead with all the velocity they were masters of. At this moment, the trembling of the sward, and the dull rumble of many hoofs close at hand, drew the attention of many, and suddenly, at a signal from Lone Wolf, every brave stood still in his tracks; but it needed not this, for the sight which met their eyes was sufficient to banish all motion, and to paralyze their senses.

On, in a wild, irregular stampede, came a body of horsemen, but not one of them with the power to guide the steed that he rode. Reeling this way and that, some reeling backward, and some forward, blood-stained, with broken feathers, and hair hanging in wild disorder, their glassy, lifeless eyes staring directly ahead—on came the stampede of death that had been seen by the three prairie pards afar down the range. Doubtless the corpse-burdened steeds had run about the plains in every direction, and had eventually scented their kind in the valley. Bad as the dead Apaches looked, the horses to which they were bound did not present a much more agreeable appearance; for the mustangs were reeking with sweat, and covered with foam, their eyes glaring wildly, while snorts of terror broke on all sides as they galloped madly toward the Apaches—galloped at headlong speed, and as the braves took in the fearful sight, they sprang with yells of superstitious terror to the right and to the left. The stampede had been pointed directly toward the assembled Apaches, the mustangs being doubtless eager to get near to the living; and, as the braves rushed from their places, and the wild steeds came upon the dead who were lying upon the ground, they reared, and plunged, and

snorted in the greatest confusion. Then, driven to frenzy, they rushed toward to the west side of the valley, having evidently got scent of the horses of the bandits in the secret, rock-bound corral. Horror-stricken, the Apaches gazed at their dead; for, although perfectly natural that the mustangs should follow their fellows, still they could not but consider it a bad omen in the first place to have their funeral ceremonies broken in upon, and secondly in so strange a manner by those who had themselves been deprived of burial.

Although the riders had long since been bereft of life, still the corpses would seem to have resolved that, as they had been neglected, the others should not have the advantage of them in any particular.

The terrified warriors of Lone Wolf were appalled, and all the superstition in their natures was aroused, for they remembered, only too distinctly, that the dead who had already been buried and walled up in the cave down the range had been made to rise again and to protest against the burial of these same braves who had been made ready to go on the long, dark trail, according to the usage and ceremonies of their branch of the Apache tribe. Now these same neglected dead had appeared to interfere with the obsequies of their fellow-braves who had since then fallen in battle. It had begun to be very evident that the spirits of the slain were anything but pleased with the living, and seemed determined to give them no little trouble; and to do this they seemed to control not only their former bodies, but also their mustangs. But the Apaches were now doubly thunderstruck, for as they gazed in awe at the cavalcade of death, one by one they apparently disappeared into the side of the solid rock. Every eye was now fixed upon that point in the cliff where the mustangs and their ghastly riders had disappeared. The dead, it almost seemed, were at length determined that they would give themselves burial.

Not long, however, were the braves frozen in their tracks, for Lone Wolf's voice rung in thunder tones:

"Vamos! Warriors of the Pecos! Rattlesnake, the Tonkaway, came from the rocks, and our mustangs have gone in at the same hole. Are you fools that you do not know a mustang will go where mustangs feed! Vamos! The fine horses of Diablo Duke are beyond the rock!"

No sooner had this reasonable and very agreeable assertion been made by their chief than, as if a heavy load had been lifted off their minds, all set up a yell and followed Lone Wolf at a run toward the point at which the mustangs had vanished.

The chief, as he came to the passage, gave a whoop of exultation and entered, followed by his braves, and as all pressed into the outlaws' corral and saw that it was filled with the fine horses of the followers of Devil Duke, among which with joyful neighing wandered the corpse-laden mustangs, the mountains rung and echoed with wild Apache yells.

The horses of the outlaws were at once collected, the picket-pins being pulled from the earth, and led into the outer valley, where they were again picketed. Then Lone Wolf dispatched braves to encircle the new-found opening in the range and to search for a cave, in which to entomb their dead.

One of some extent was soon found, and then the mustangs, with their dead riders, were led within it, and the animals immediately shot, in order that their owners might not be forced to walk the long, dark trail to the happy hunting-grounds.

The same ceremony was performed for the braves who had been slain near the cavern of Devil Duke, they also being brought up from the outer valley, and then the cave was walled up as had been the other. The last duties and respects having thus been paid, Lone Wolf and his remaining warriors once more congregated on the plain, opposite to the outlaw fort, awaiting the return of those braves, or a signal from them, who had been sent to search along the side of the mountain for the cavern in which the bandit chief had stored his supplies.

They had not long to possess their souls in patience; for a rifle-shot soon awoke the echoes of the valley, followed by an Apache death-yell just above the natural fort which had been held by the outlaws.

"Vamos!" yelled the Apache chief, as he sprung in its direction, and began climbing the mountain side.

In less than ten minutes, Lone Wolf, with his braves at his back, was within pistol-shot of the entrance to the cavern of the outlaw band, some with bow in hand and arrow fitted to string, others with their rifles, all knowing that they were near the place from which the shot had fired, as the flash of the explosion had been seen from the valley.

They approached with extreme caution the little motte of cedars which grew at the mouth of the cave, and had proceeded but a few paces further than the distance designated above, when the report of two rifles, one close following upon the other, sounded from the motte in front of them, and two braves, sounding out their death-

yell upon the clear night air, threw up their arms and fell dead upon the rocks.

Knowing that there could not be many to oppose him, Lone Wolf again yelled out, "Vam!" and on rushed the red horde madly, but only to be met by a rattling fusillade of revolver shots. These, however, only checked their advance for a moment; but, as they were again bounding onward, the Tonkaway war-cry sounded loud and piercing from the valley below. The Apache chief at once halted, but ordered a dozen of his braves forward.

As Lone Wolf stood and gazed back into the valley, his ugly and repulsive visage became contorted with the most intense ferocity and rage; for he saw his hated foe, Rattlesnake, the Tonkaway, mounted upon El Negro, and stampeding the whole herd of horses that had belatedly to the outlaw band, toward the oaks at the north entrance to the valley. As if he knew that the eyes of Lone Wolf were upon him, the Tonkaway caused his horse to fly like the wind, up and down the valley as if inviting pursuit, at the same time making the most insulting gestures toward the Apaches. It was more than savage nature could well bear; but Lone Wolf's anger, which bordered upon fury, was somewhat appeased by the yells of his braves in the motte, which told him that the cavern of Devil Duke had been discovered.

Rushing like a madman through the cedars, the Apache chief soon stood amid his warriors at the mouth of the cave; where, upon the rocks before him, lay three of the braves whom he had sent to search it out, all dead and scalped, and with their ears cut off.

"Ugh!" came from the throat of the angered Apache. "Old Rock!" and he stopped in his tracks as if expecting his own death-shot, peering into the darkness of the cave with something akin to fear in his paint-daubed face. Goaded to fiendish frenzy by the many losses he had met with during the night—the stampeding of the captured herd of mustangs by the Tonkaway being considered by him the most serious—the Apache chief uttered his war-cry, and plunged into the thick darkness before him.

The cavern retreat of Devil Duke was soon turned into a perfect Pandemonium, fairly swarming with Apache braves.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE OLD SCOUT HAS HIS HANDS FULL.

We left Old Rocky at the door of the cave-chamber, intently listening for any indications of the presence of any of his own species in the outer cavern; his nature being such that it never permitted him to remain very long inactive, especially when, as at present, he was encompassed by danger.

Since he had seen Laura Libby, and felt the influence of her angelic presence, he was extremely anxious in regard to the movements of the Apaches.

Never before had the old scout been so deeply impressed by any woman; in fact he had at all times avoided the sex, never feeling at ease in their presence, and being quite well aware of his own uncomely exterior and uncouth language.

But there was something about this fair girl in the cave-chamber beyond, that caused him to think of what he had too seldom thought of before—something so superhuman that he was forced to think of the great hereafter, and to wish that he only knew how to pray for her. Not that he supposed for a moment that she could, by any possibility, need his prayers, except in one sense, for he felt that she must be as free from sin as an infant; but, for all that, he wanted to do something for her, and the desire to do so came into his thoughts first through the influence of her presence, and a sense of her weakness and innocence. He felt, in short, that she was too fragile for earth, and needed the special protection of Heaven; and that it was which he would have liked to solicit for her.

Being puzzled in regard to the manner of setting about the accomplishment of his desire, it suddenly occurred to him that he could manage, as he expressed it, to do "some considerable toward ther perfect biz, hisself;" and he at once set about it, in his usual prompt manner.

He could hear nothing in the cave beyond the door, and he therefore made up his mind to try and see how affairs were progressing in the outer air.

Not deeming it prudent to leave the door open, and thus, in the event of his being "corraled," leaving Shooting Star and Laura in danger of capture or death, he hastily returned to the inner cave-chamber. The young scout was seated on the bedside, he having prevailed upon Laura again to recline upon the couch, and he now held her hands clasped in his, while each gazed into the eyes of the other with an expression of undying love, their faces bearing the impress of unalloyed happiness, and themselves apparently unconscious of their surroundings. They were engaged in low and earnest conversation, and did not perceive the approach of the old scout until he stood within five paces of them.

Holding his rifle in the hollow of his arm, Old Rocky removed his sombrero, as he said,

"Sense me, folkses; but hit 'pears ter me somethin' hez gut ter be did ag'in ther reds stompedes in on us. Pard, I'lows yer ain't in no fix ter fight part like; but ef yer'll come an' lock ther door arter I levants, I'll kinder flop roun' an' see what kind of a lay-out air outside."

"Put on your hat, old pard," said Shooting Star, springing to his feet. "You need not feel embarrassed, or think that any ceremony is needed with us. I have been telling Laura about your noble self-sacrificing nature, and how she would not have been saved but for your services in her behalf; also what a kind friend you have been to me. Come, allow me to introduce you to Miss Laura Libby, the dearest girl on earth in the estimation of your prairie pard, and of whom you have heard me speak many a time of late. Laura, he knows all about us."

"Mr. Rocky," said Laura, with the utmost respect and sincere feeling; "please shake hands with me. May God ever bless you! And, believe me, I love you as a father, and always shall."

The old scout very gingerly took the tiny white hand in his huge hard one, but he was too full for utterance; in fact a tear or two "stamped" down his grizzly beard, which he brushed off nervously, but it was strange to himself that he did not feel at all ashamed of his weakness in the presence of these two.

Throwing off his emotion, he plunged into business.

"Pard," he said, looking Shooting Star in the eye; "I's atead yer hes kinder fergit in yer happiness at meetin' Miss Laury, an' findin' her safe, thet we-uns is all in a mighty clost kind o' a fix. Has yer bin a-talkin' 'bout thet cuss, Devil Duke, an' both 'greed thet he air ther condemn'd cuss what hes bin ther means o' settin' yer both back, an' fillin' yer hearts with sorrer?"

"Yes," replied the young man, as he arose and paced back and forth with blazing eyes and raising his clenched fist in air; "Laura recognized him when he took her from the Apache camp down the range; and, by my hopes of Heaven, if the miscreant lives—and I pray that still he may—I'll tear his black heart out, first forcing from him a confession of his crimes! If he is killed, or should he escape, my life is still under a ban, and happiness still afar off. Unless, indeed, Laura should consent to exile herself from her people, to follow the fortunes of a pro-crimed outlaw like myself. Although I am innocent, and she has ever believed it, still I hesitate to allow her to make such a sacrifice for me. What is your opinion, old pard? Do you think that Devil Duke is still alive?"

"Yer kan't kill ther cuss by any reg'lar way, pard; konsek'ently he air a-cavortin' roun' loose till yit; an' he will be arter ther 'Paches hes levanted. We'll corral him I'm dead-sure, so don't yer fret. I'lows ter glide outen this fer a lone scout, an' ef I wants yer I'll come fer yer, an' we'll hev ter leave Miss Laury ahint hyer-a-ways. She kin lock herself in, an' not open ontill we-uns knocks, an' she kin tell who we is by our tongue-music. Fu'st off, I'll go alone, an' yer kin talk ahead while I'm gone, but open mighty lively when I knocks."

"All right, old pard; I'll attend to the door. Laura and I will pass on to the outer entrance, and wait in readiness; but, for Heaven's sake, be prudent and take no risks. You know who it is that claims your protection as well as mine."

"Yes," added Laura; "I trust, Mr. Rocky, that you will bear in mind that I shall be very anxious until your return. I have passed through so much distress of mind and suffering of body of late, that I am no stronger than a child. Your child, let me say, 'Old Rocky,' if you will feel better at having me thus address you."

"Thet air ther way ter put hit," said the old scout, with a pleased expression upon his face. "I shill try an' be keertul, though hit's ag'in' my natur' ter take a back seat. I'lows I hes gut jist 'bout so many sculps ter corral afore I goes an' flops over ter make a die o' hit; but I shill put off ther most risky biz untill I sees yer safe on ther Frio er Medina. But, levanted air ther word. Shootin' Star; keep nigh onter ther door, fer I mought hev a clost shave comin' back."

Both the young scout and Laura pressed the old man's hand, as he opened the door, and passed out into the Egyptian darkness of the outer cave.

Old Rocky felt his way along the wall, making close calculations as to distance, to guide him to the entrance of the cave chamber when he should return. Soon he reached the open air. Darting to the edge of the cedars, he looked down in the clear moonlight upon the valley, just at the very moment that the stampede of death went at headlong speed among the Apaches, living and dead. The apparent fright and horror of the Indians at the return of their dead, caused the old scout to chuckle with delight. In fact, he could barely suppress a yell, as the Apaches ran like frightened deer to the south and east of the slain braves; then, when the corpse-freighted mustangs ran

toward, and disappeared in the cliff, Old Rocky was, in his turn, as dumfounded and puzzled as the reds themselves.

When the Apaches, under the leadership of Lone Wolf rushed toward the point where the animals had so mysteriously disappeared, the old scout wondered still more, for he would not have believed, had he not witnessed it, that the reds would dare approach where their dead had just vanished. Had he known, however, that his pard, the Tonkaway, had previously entered the valley from the same point, he would not have thought it so strange and remarkable.

In another moment the Apaches had vanished from view; and none but the slain now occupied the valley, which fact caused Old Rocky to exclaim, in the very extremity of surprise:

"Dog-gone my half-sister's black cat!"

Barely had the remark left his lips when he heard the snap of a twig in his rear, and turning quickly about, he saw an Apache brave within a few feet of him. The red was peering toward the cave, and had not as yet seen the old scout.

Leaning his rifle against a bush, Old Rocky quickly drew his bowie, and with one wild bound sprung upon the warrior. It was a complete surprise, but the old scout found that he had encountered an antagonist who was by no means to be despised; for, although he buried his bowie in the side of the brave; the latter at once grappled with the old hero, and a terrible tussle ensued, each clasping the other tightly; but, with a desperate effort, the scout wrenched himself loose from the weakening clutch of the Apache, and again his bowie flashed in the moonlight, and was plunged to the hilt, through flesh and bone, to the warrior's heart.

Drawing the knife with a sudden twitch, a stream of hot blood spurted over the rocks; the eyes of the prostrate, although flinching with death, darted fierce glances of hate into those of his conqueror, and with a gurgling death-yell, he rolled over dead at the very entrance of the cave, the combatants having, in the fierce life and death struggle, stumbled and fought clear of the clump of cedars.

Panting with exertion, the old scout returned into the mottle, and regained his rifle; then glancing down into the valley, his surprise and disappointment were great at seeing the Apaches leading the horses of the outlaw band from the west cliff, and picket the animals in the valley. There was a goodly number of fine nags, as he could perceive very readily even at that distance.

Being suspicious, now that he knew that Lone Wolf had sent out scouts from the valley, Old Rocky moved on to the south of the thicket; but he had barely stepped clear of the cedars, when once more he was clutched in a death conflict with an Apache, who had evidently been lying in wait for him.

However, the old scout was never likely to be caught at a disadvantage, for his bowie was in his front, and easily jerked from its scabbard. Although he had his rifle with him, he was forced to drop the weapon to the earth, as the Indian sprung upon him.

Surprised though he had been, our old hero, quickly as a flash of light, caught and warded off the stab of the Apache, and clutching the brave by the hair with his left hand, he drove his knife home, jerking the bowie so quickly from the wound, as to enable him to catch the last lunge which the Indian made with his scalping knife upon his own blade; but, notwithstanding the old scout did all in his power to prevent it, the death yell rung out, and was echoed not fifty paces away by the yell of another Apache.

Knowing that he could not expect to come off victor in another hand-to-hand encounter in his now exhausted state, Old Rocky hurried the dying Indian far from him, and then darted downward among the cedars, regained his rifle, cocked the weapon, and stood ready to receive another brave, who now sprung around a boulder to the rescue of his comrade.

The old scout well knew that it would be useless for him to try and reach the cave, and that to save his life he must fire his rifle; thus raising an alarm which would lead the Apaches to the hidden retreat. But he felt great confidence in being able, with the help of his two pards, to defend the cavern. Before, however, he had any time to deliberate, the Apache came bounding toward him, and raising his rifle at once to his shoulder, Old Rocky blazed away. A wild death-yell sounded, and the Indian sprung into the air, and fell, a corpse. The old scout hurriedly tore the scalps from the heads of his foes, and cut off their ears—this last surgical operation being performed for the purpose of letting Lone Wolf know who it was that he had to contend against. He then sprung into the cave.

Making his way, as rapidly as he could, to the door of the cave chamber, Old Rocky knocked, and was admitted. Briskly he began his instructions to Shooting Star, loading his rifle as he went on.

"Come on, pard, fer we hes a leetle biz on hand. I hes wiped out three scarifiers, but

ther hull capoodle air comin' on a reg'lar stampede up ther rocks. We'll drop a few o' them, an' then jine yer, Laury. Yer needn't ter be skeered, fer we'll not be gone but a fleetin' period. Leave ther door open, an' skute inter t'other room. I reckon we kin hold our own hyer ag'in' ther hull Pache nation."

"Run, Laura!" urged Shooting Star. "Run, and remain in the other apartment until our return. Hold the door ajar, and if others than ourselves come in view, you know how to act, to keep yourself safe from harm, until you hear our knock and recognize our voices. Come on, old pard; I'm with you for anything that may come in our way. I feel strong once more."

The two scouts, without delay, made their way to the outer world; and there, ensconced in the cedar mottle, retarded the advance of the enemy, and, as we have seen, thinned their ranks. They then groped their way back to the cave chamber, barred the door, and with a courage that was equal to any emergency, awaited events; Shooting Star going within to reassure and cheer Laura, and Old Rocky taking up his position at the outer door.

Not five minutes had the old scout thus stood listening, when he knew by the sounds, slight though they were, that the cave was literally swarming with Apache braves.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ROMAN CANDLES AND GRENADES.

SATISFIED that the Apaches, in full force, were in the main cavern, Old Rocky hastened to the rear cave chamber, where he saw that Shooting Star had thrown a blanket over the dead Bonita, and was seated at a table in the opposite corner with Laura, taking some refreshments. Both of them seemed much improved in spirits, and the young lady was rejoicing at the safe return of her protectors.

Laura arose as the old scout approached, and his quick eye perceived that she had changed her torn apparel and arranged her beautiful hair.

"I am so glad to see you here in safety," she said, rising and extending her hand. "I have found some refreshments, of which we were much in need; but not more so, I fancy, than yourself. Will you please join us?"

"Miss Laury, I hain't gut time ter jine yer, 'ceptin' hit mought be in takin' a drink o' wine, er somethin' bracin', fer I smell hefty biz ahead. Hit 'pears ter me thet ther meetin' 'tween my pard an' you hev done yer both a heap o' good, fer I never see'd two humans brace up better in sich a pesky short period."

"We have good reasons, old pard, for bracing up, and we both feel the need of doing so," said Shooting Star; "but how is everything? Has Lone Wolf scented out this hole in the rock?"

"Wa-al, I reckon his bellyuns is 'bout all inside o' hit by this, an' cavortin' roun' on the sly. Hit won't be long afore they'll git desp'rit an' build a fire, an' then they can't help but dis-kiver our lay-out hyer. Reckon then they'll burn us out. We'd better kinder git ready ter gi'n 'em a few pops, ter keep 'em from ther door. I'd gi'n a d'ubloon ter know whar ther Tonk' air, fer we needs him 'bout now, mighty bad. This air ther fust time I ever knowed him ter be in the shade, when we-uns hed hefty biz on hand all ter onct."

As the old man ceased speaking he took a liberal glass of wine from the hand of Laura.

"I have every confidence in our red pard," said Shooting Star. "If he is alive—and I sincerely trust that nothing has befallen him—you may rest assured that he is not idle, but is working ill to the enemy in some way, and to benefit us. You see, old friend, I insisted upon Laura's appropriating some female apparel which we found here. Nothing like looking tidy when one can."

"Yas, I noticed she hed gut some fresh togs onter her. Reckon this hyer outfit all b'longs to us now; but I don't see as yer is so anxious 'bout corralin' Devil Duke as yer was, pard. Kin we git along 'thout ther cuss in this hyer program?"

"No!" burst from the lips of Shooting Star, with the most intense feeling. "I have banished him from my mind only for the moment. I do not think, as you have said before, that the Apaches have killed or taken him, and I'll hunt him to the death. But I forgot to inform you that I have made a discovery that will be of great benefit to us, and which accounts for my being free from much concern in regard to the Apaches. There are a number of hand-grenades and Roman candles stored in the lower part of that closet or cabinet."

"'Pears ter me I hes heerd tell o' sich things et ther forts, but I never see'd any on 'em, es I knows on. Ef yer knows how ter engineer ther things, mebbe so they'd come in handy ter stompede ther reds. Reckon we'd better glide toward ther t'other door an' gi'n 'em a few lead pills. I see thar's a couple o' rifle holes in ther door with slides over 'em, an' ef they makes things too hot for us thar we kin glide this-a-ways."

"Keep perfectly cool, Laura," enjoined the young scout, as he grasped his rifle. "I apprehend no danger that we cannot surmount; in-

deed, I think we have a sure thing out of the woods. Even Old Rocky does not know the terrible power of those hand-grenades." So saying Shooting Star started after the old scout, while Laura, with a shudder as she glanced at the blanket-covered corpse of Bonita, seated herself quietly to await further developments.

The two scouts had not crossed one-half of the next apartment, when the cavern rung with the wildest and most exultant yells.

They now knew that the Apaches had kindled a fire, and by this means had discovered the door of their chamber, and they knew as well that the fire would soon be transferred to the door itself. Rushing forward they both drew gently aside the movable blocks that covered the two holes in the door, and which had probably been cut for the same purpose for which they now intended to use them.

Peeping out, themselves unseen as it was perfectly dark where they stood, a sight met their view that would have appalled most men. Some thirty braves, each with a torch, were just coming to the vicinity of the door from various arched passages in which they had been searching for the store and living rooms of the outlaws, while at the same spot where the Mexican girl had her fire burning when Shooting Star and Old Rocky entered the cave, turned a high, blazing fire, fed by two burly braves.

"Thar's our meat," said Old Rocky to his pard; "thar's two red niggers by ther fire what hes done devilment enough in this section. I takes ther right, you ther left. Air yer ready?"

"All ready," replied the young scout.

"Pull trigger!"

Both rifles belched fire as one, and a most crashing and thundering report rung through the dreary passages, and causing the Indians in more than one instance to drop their torches in terror and dismay. The two braves at the fire fell dead across the blaze that they were feeding, and yells of surprise and madness rung right and left. Just at this instant Lone Wolf appeared around a rocky bend, and as he came upon the scene and saw his warriors dragging the dead from the fire, he yelled with fury. At the same moment he caught sight of the door. Ordering some of his braves to bring more fuel from the outside, the Apache chief put himself in a safe position, as did all the warriors, knowing full well the unerring aim of the noted scouts whom they felt sure they had run to cover at last, and were determined, at any and all risks, to kill or capture. Indeed it was well known among the tribe that Old Rocky's scalp would be worth fifty horses to any brave, to say nothing of the rank and distinction which would be the reward of the one who should send the old scout upon the long, dark trail.

Now that the Indians were aware of the loopholes in the door, it was evident to the scouts that it was useless to remain where they were. They knew that a fire would soon be kindled against the oaken planks, and that as they must be as dry as tinder, it would be but a short time before the way would be open to the Apaches. They could hear the orders of Lone Wolf and the noise of the wood being piled against the door; so they returned hastily to the inner cave chamber to prepare for the worst. Old Rocky began to look gloomy.

"I doesn't know nothin' 'bout yer fire-works, pard," he said, "an' yer'll hev ter show me how ter tech ther things off. I'm kinder inclined ter think hit 'll be a clost shave fer us ter git outen this, fer Lone Wolf bankers arter my ha'r wuss nor a starvin' panther-cat kin do arter warm meat."

"I don't feel the least concern, old pard," asserted Shooting Star. "We'll make them stampede like frightened sheep, and when we get them out on the mountain-side we'll be able to finish a good many of them with hand grenades. I tell you, we hold a flush hand."

"I hopes ter gracious we kin clean 'em out; but, es I said afore, I'm a leetle dub'us, though I'm ready ter play Davy Crockett up ter ther handle."

Here the scouts joined Laura, who, with an anxious and scared look fixed upon the distant door, was listening with horror to the yells of the Apaches, her blood almost congealing in her veins at the thought that she might possibly fall again into the hands of the merciless Lone Wolf.

"Don't be frightened, my darling," said Shooting Star, in a cheering and sanguine tone; "we will lose the last drop of our blood, if necessary, before you shall again fall into the hands of these fiends."

"Do you wonder at my being terrified after all that I have suffered, Charles? I feel faint and sick at heart, for it seems that such overwhelming numbers must succeed, and that your efforts at defense and repulse must avail us nothing. Even our old friend here, I can see, looks as though he felt doubts of your ability, and had begun to lose confidence in himself."

"Wa-al, Laury, I owns up thet hit 'pears as though we was in too tight a box ter crawl out 'thout scrapin' ther hide an' ha'r off, even ef we kin skin out at all. But I never gi'n's up till I is bored clean through. What air nex' on ther

p'ogram, pard? How 'bout yer fire-works an' things?"

"Give me a kiss, Laura," said the young scout, embracing the trembling girl, who clung to him as though she thought it the last. "Just so. There, I will take two; and now for business, which you will see, old pard, is going to surprise you and demoralize the brutal butchers of Lone Wolf at the same time. Have you any matches?"

"Nary a match, but I hes gut jest a better article, an' thet air flint an' steel."

"All right, then. That lamp hangs so high that it is too much trouble to take it down. Collect some of those sticks from the fire-place yonder and build a small cone with them near the door. Then set it on fire. I'll bring out the civilizers from the cabinet, and I trust they will prove to be liberators as well."

From the sounds of triumph at this time in the outer cave, our friends knew that the door must have been effectually set fire to, or such a din would not have been made.

Hastily Old Rocky built a small fire near the door, and Shooting Star rushed toward it with a score of large Roman candles, which he deposited upon the rock floor, and going again to the cabinet, returned with a dozen hand grenades in a basket. The old scout began to brighten.

"Old pard," exclaimed his young friend, hurriedly, "here are two loop-holes in this door. Mind what I say. We must shut the door, leaving the loop-holes open. Then, as soon as the Apaches rush through into the next apartment, we must give them a couple of shots. This done, we quickly lean our rifles against the wall, I light two candles and then pass them to you. Next, I light two for myself. When these begin to show something like business, we throw open the door and point them directly toward the Indians. Do you think, Laura, that you have the nerve to stand here and light fresh candles for us?"

"Oh, yes, Charles, I will do anything that may aid in our defense—anything to assist in driving these pitiless fiends from the cave."

"Good, my brave girl! I knew that you were not weak when necessity demanded action, as it does now from us all. Your presence gives me the power and strength of a dozen men, although it is but a short time since I was as weak and nerveless as an infant from what I have lately undergone. Stand here, my darling, and may God favor the right!"

Stationing the young girl with care, in order that she might be within easy reach of fire and candles, Shooting Star ran back to the cabinet, soon returning with a whoop of surprise and pleasure as he dragged two black dominoes, with masks of the same color, and high peaked hats, which had evidently been used by the bandits in initiating members into the gang.

"Here, old pard," he exclaimed, joyously. "Here's just what we want. Put on this long robe, with the hat and mask. Here are holes for the eyes, so we will be able to work as well as though they were not on our faces. Gotten up in this style, we shall be hideous, and the strange fires flying from our hands will cause the Indians to think they have found their way into the home of the bad spirits. We'll give them a foretaste of it."

As the young scout spoke, he arrayed himself in the somber suit, and then said:

"Look at me, old pard! Don't you think there is a big card in our little game?"

"Yer kin jist bet yer boots on that. Dog my cats, but yer do look like ther Old Boy hisself, er 'bout es I s'pose he mought 'pear."

"And you too. I can return the compliment," said Shooting Star, as Old Rocky stood fully dressed in his new habiliments. "Don't get alarmed, Laura. But I see you are smiling, and I am glad to think that you are beginning to be more hopeful. Now, we are ready for the first act; but I am not very anxious after all for the curtain to rise."

Another series of fiendish yells now rung through the underground passages; and, peeping out from the loop-holes, the scouts saw that the flames of fire were darting through holes and cracks in the outer door. The Apaches, it was very evident, had not been idle.

"Hit's purty nigh onter ther commence o' ther fandang," suggested Old Rocky. "Ther cusses is dead sure ter knock in ther door in a few fleetin' periods, an' then glide lively this-a-ways. But es yer hes put up ther job, pard, I'm thinkin' they'll mebbe levant 'bout es fast back ag'in. I'd give a hundred horses, though, ef Laury war outen this; then we-'uns could hev some ole he fun. Soon es we glides arter ther reds when they skedaddles, yer must shut ther door, Laury, an' lay low until we comes this-a-ways ag'in."

"Yes, Laura; and don't worry. We'll follow them with the hand grenades, and you'll hear music after we get to the mouth of the cave. Pick up four candles ready for me to grasp, and light them as soon as we fire."

Catching up their rifles, the two scouts, so strangely attired, stood in readiness at the loop-holes.

But a moment remained they thus, when a loud crash sounded through the cave, and they

saw the burning door fall inward, still in a blaze.

Beyond the opening, their hideous faces showing plainly in the firelight, was a massed crowd of Apaches, their weapons in hand, their eyes glaring with hatred and a thirst for blood, but the flames were still too fierce for them to advance.

At a yell from Lone Wolf, two braves soon made their way to the burning door with buckets of water. Seeing their intention, Old Rocky cried out:

"Give 'em hot lead, pard; quick! er we'll git balked outen our shots."

"All right, old pard. Here we go again!"

Once more the cavern rung and echoed with the loud combined reports of the two rifles; and following them, came the cries of agony and whoops of fury, as the water was dashed upon the blazing door, and all again was darkness.

"Quick, Laura! I hear the tread of moccasined feet," cried Shooting Star. He grasped two Roman candles, thrust their ends into the fire, and passed them to the old scout. Clutching four more, he ignited them in an instant, as he called out:

"Open the door, Old Rocky, and take your posish!"

A hissing, sputtering sound filled the cave, as the old scout swung open the door of the chamber in which they stood, and sprang to the right side of it. At the same moment his friend joined him, and the six hissing candles, threw out a perfect shower of brilliant sparks.

The next instant the outer chamber of the cave was illuminated as bright as day, showing the horde of Apaches coming *en masse*; but the reds were immediately after seemingly paralyzed with terror, as the two strange human objects met their view—objects, the like of which they could not imagine to belong to earth—from whose hands flew balls of fire of every hue into their very midst.

For a brief space the savages stood as if transfixed, and then turned as one man, and dashed in mad confusion toward the main entrance.

Then it was that Laura Libby saw her opportunity, and threw a hand grenade into the middle of the chamber. It exploded, just in the rear of the fleeing Indians, with a report like thunder, killing two braves and wounding another, the yell of whom together with the explosion, caused the Apaches to stampede as if the bad spirits of their traditions were close on their tracks.

"Quick, Old Rocky!" called out the young scout. "Light two more, and run for the mouth of the cave. Laura, shut the door. We'll soon return."

Seizing the basket of hand grenades, Shooting Star passed the old scout, rushed after the fast-flying warriors of Lone Wolf, their front still illuminated by the brilliant fire-balls from the Roman candles. On and out, into the open air, dashed our friends, until they stood upon the clear rocks beyond the thicket of cedars.

Here and there, below them, were the braves of the Pecos, clambering down the mountain side, and casting back glances of the most abject terror.

As fast as Shooting Star could take them from the basket, he threw the hand grenades afar out in all directions; the same exploding every moment with terrific reports, awakening a thousand echoes, and causing the Apaches to leap from rock to rock at the risk of life, many of them being killed outright by the flyin' iron, and the survivors led by Lone Wolf—himself for once terrified—running with all speed toward the south entrance through the rocks, within which they speedily disappeared from view.

"Dog-gone my half-sister's black cat!" exclaimed the old scout, in joy and triumph. "We made ther riddle dead sure an' sartin. Pard, I takes fire-works in mine straight along hyerarter."

"We couldn't play that game on Lone Wolf a second time, Old Rocky. It was a risky affair, and all depended upon whether the chief or any of his braves had seen any such thing before at the forts, or used as signals by the boys in blue. I staked everything on the game, and thank Heaven, we have won. But I can't avoid laughing at your comical appearance. It's as good as a play. Hello! What's up now?"

"Hit's ther Tonk, sure es yer is borned," said the old scout; "an' he's corraled the last one o' Devil Duke's nags. Thet Rattlesnake air a brack!"

The occasion of these remarks was, that as the Indians disappeared through the south entrance, the herd of horses which had belonged to the outlaws came galloping into the valley from the oaks at the north, being driven and urged on by the wild yells of the Tonkaway, who still rode upon El Negro, the famous black stallion of the bandit chief.

"Come on, pard," said Old Rocky: "we'd better git inside, an' git outen these togs, er ther Tonk will shoot us. 'Sides that, I don't feel nat'ral like at all. I ain't used to play actorin'."

"All right, old pard. We must hasten to relieve the mind of poor Laura, who must be filled with dread at being left alone with

the corpse of that Mexican girl. I should feel much worse in my mind at having been forced to shoot, had not Laura informed me that the female fiend, when she tied my darling up, told her that she had murdered a white woman Devil Duke had brought here a month ago, and that she intended to kill her, should the outlaws be defeated. In fact, Laura looked forward to being brutally murdered as soon as the Mexican girl had discovered any one in the cave who did not belong to the band. But this was not all. She made Laura confess to having known Devil Duke previously, and this aroused her jealousy; for the bandit had informed his favorite that Laura was the daughter of a rich old ranchero, from whom he expected a large ransom for her. I have not the least doubt that Laura would have been murdered before the eyes of Devil Duke by this she assassin, had the outlaw succeeded in beating off the Apaches. Thus far we have been more successful than I had dared hope to be; but Duke Darrow, if not dead, is still somewhere in the range, and without a horse. I am determined to hunt the wretch to his doom, for I have sworn to have his heart's blood, and I'll keep my vow, nor will I rest until it has been fulfilled. I'll wring a confession from him, if I am forced to torture him at the stake to accomplish it. Come on, my good old friend. The Tonkaway will soon join us, and he has been the hero of the night. I say, what on earth are you watching now?"

"I war lookin' at ther Tonk. He has driv' ther nags back ag'in inter the rocks whar Devil Duke kep' 'em, and I reckon hit'll take sharp eyes ter find 'em. Thet ther Rattlesnake air a highfer-lutin' XXX cuss, bet yer last lingerin' picker-yune. Ha! ha! ha! ho! ho! ho! This hev bin ther loveliest, sweet-scented leetle fandang' what I ever shuck a fut at, an' with ther real slam-up boss music et that."

With these words, the two scouts, in their weird disguise, passed into the cave, little thinking that every word they had uttered had been heard by Devil Duke, who lay tied and gagged directly above where they had stood, and that the declaration of Shooting Star had driven the last ray of hope from the outlaw's breast.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TONKAWAY TURNS UP.

HASTENING as fast as the darkness would permit them, being forced to feel their way along the rock walls of the cave, Old Rocky and Shooting Star soon stood knocking at the inner door of the secret-chamber.

"Open! Open, Laura, to the victors of the night! All is serene and beautiful as a summer's dream."

Thus spoke the young scout, in a joyous voice which was echoed by a glad cry of intense relief; and Laura threw open the heavy door, and the next instant was folded in the arms of Shooting Star.

Heartfelt, indeed, was the thanksgiving of the long suffering maiden, unable though she was to give voice to her emotions, as the long pent-up tears flowed down her cheeks.

"I'll not be selfish, or chide you for crying, my darling. I know that it is for joy, and the tears will relieve your overtasked brain. Now, give Old Rocky a good hug; for, had it not been for him, all our plans would have been nothing worth. He has been the regulator of the party."

The scouts had both torn off their masks upon entering the cavern, and Old Rocky had stood in his tracks, looking at the young pair with whose fortunes he had of late been so closely connected; and while thus standing, Laura turned from the embrace of her lover, and threw her arms impulsively about the neck of her old friend.

"May the good Lord bless yer, leetle Laury!" said the old scout, in great agitation. "Thet's ther longest pra'r I hes said since my marm used ter hev me say, 'Now I lay me.' So saying, and sweeping his sleeve across his eyes, he grasped his rifle, as if the touch of the familiar weapon might relieve him of his embarrassment."

"Come, old pard, let us shut the door, and get these costumes off, and then for some refreshments. We must establish ourselves in these quarters until I hunt Duke Darrow to his doom. My oath is uppermost in my mind, now that Laura is at last in safety."

Tearing off their robes, Old Rocky throwing them into a corner with evident relief, the latter resumed his old sombrero, and advanced to the table to which the young girl was now conveying food and wine from the store of the bandits.

Touching Shooting Star on the shoulder, he pointed in silence from the corpse of Bonita to Laura, and then opening the door to the outer chamber, he advanced toward the body, the young scout understanding his object, and following him.

"Keep your eyes on the cabinet for a moment, Laura," said Shooting Star. "We are about to remove the body of that wretched Mexican girl."

Carefully they took up the corpse, and bore it to the outer cave, and there laid it in the darkness, composing the limbs in a natural position. They then returned, talking cheerfully,

in order that they might dispel disagreeable thoughts from the mind of Laura.

All three then sat down to table and partook of an excellent lunch, washed down with old port. Old Rocky grumbling all the while at the absence of coffee.

"N' ver mind, pard," said the young scout; "we'll hunt up some coffee presently. This is a long way better than a dry board as it is. I feel like a new man. Laura, I hope you are feeling better."

"Indeed I am, Charles. It seems as if I had awakened from a horrid dream. I can only hope that the terrible trials, and dangers, and sufferings which have beset me on every side of late, are now at an end, and that this indeed is an awakening."

"You can rest assured of that, my darling. From this out your path shall be in pleasant places. If I am permitted to have anything to do in forwarding such an end. Do you really think that the senorita would have killed you, if we had not succeeded in forcing our way into the cave?"

"I am positive that she would. I could see murder in her eyes, from the very moment that I told her I had known Duke Darrow previous to his becoming an outlaw. She raged up and down the chamber, with her knife in her hand, now and then making stabs at me, and swearing she would murder me before the very eyes of the outlaw chief as soon as he returned. She vowed also, by all the saints she could think of, that if the band should be defeated and the chief killed by the Apaches or by my friends, she would torture me, and force me to die a lingering death. She was indeed a most dreadful woman, worse by far than I had supposed it possible for one of my sex ever to become. But, do you know nothing of the train? Can you tell me nothing of my mother and uncle? The Apaches, by whom I was first taken, halted near the camp on the Hondo, and I fear that they murdered some of the women and children. No doubt they would have massacred all of them, had I not forced the gag from my mouth and screamed. At that time I believe that my uncle and the teamsters were on the prairie in search of me."

"We don't know nothin' 'bout ther train," was the reply of Old Rocky. "I war goin' down arter a boss fer my pard hyer, when I see'd that his critter war gone up; but I arterward come ter ther conclusion that I'd better glide up crick, an' look arter Shootin' Star hisself, which war 'bout ther bestest thing I could 'a' did, as hit 'pears now. Howsomever, we 'uns kin jine ther train in a couple o' days, ef not afore. I don't reckon ther reds hed time ter do much damidge, ef es yer says they wasn't gone more'n five er ten miuits."

"Let us hope for the best, Laura; and thank Heaven we have been as fortunate as we have. When—"

At this moment the young scout was interrupted by a single loud knock at the door. Springing forward, he cried out:

"Rattlesnake, are you there?"

"Rattlesnake is here," was the laconic reply, in the familiar intonation of the Tonkaway chief.

Shooting Star threw open the door, and the Indian stalked proudly into the cave-chamber, and stood with folded arms in the middle of the apartment. Not the least sign of the labor and excitement of the night was visible upon him.

"Dog-gone my half-sister's black cat, Tonk! Hit does my ole eyes good ter gaze inter yer peepers on't more. Gi'n us yer fist fer a reg'lar XXX shake. Yer kep' yer word, es yer allers does, an' stompeded ther hull outfit o' bad whites. I'd rather hev ther devil hisself on ther war-path arter me nor hev you. Yer rattlers done ther biz fer ther hull consarn."

"It is my turu now," said Shooting Star. "Rattlesnake, I have thought as much of you as of a brother since I have known you, up to this night; but now words cannot begin to express my regard. My future conduct toward you must prove the truth of what I would say."

"Rattlesnake heap glad see white brothers with scalps on head," said the Tonkaway, as he took the hands of the scouts in his, and placed their palms over his heart in token of amity and friendship. "Rattlesnake have heap work in valley. Got heap mustangs in rock corral. Ride through Apache dogs on black horse. Make heap big scare. Then drive mustang on plain. Now my white brothers drive Lone Wolf to Pecos. Then drive mustangs back. Bad white dogs. Apache squaws."

Laura, having by this time recognized the Indian as the one whom she had seen in San Antonio, and whom, later on, she had seen draw her lover up into the tree, when at Lone Wolf's camp down the range, came up.

The scout stepped aside as the young girl approached the Tonkaway, Shooting Star saying:

"Laura, this is Rattlesnake, the brave Indian to whom we owe our lives—to whom we owe all the respect and regard that our lives can ever render to him."

"You need not tell me who he is, Charles. I saw him when he saved you at the Apache camp, dragging your senseless form up into a tree, after killing two of the Apaches; and I

know that he would have saved me also, had not the outlaw band charged into the timber. Rattlesnake, let me take your hand, and thank you from my heart of hearts for the noble, self-sacrificing services you have rendered to me and to my friends."

The Indian took Laura's white hand in his bronzed palm, and cast a glance full of reverence into her eyes, as he laid it on his broad painted breast.

"Sun Hair's words have found the heart of Rattlesnake. The Great Spirit has watched over his child, and the dogs of the Apaches have fled like scared coyotes toward the Pecos. Rattlesnake is glad. When Sun Hair is in danger, his war-cry will sound loud. His scalping-knife will be sharp, and his bow will shoot straight. My white brothers are great braves. Rattlesnake is proud to call them his friends. The bad whites are food for the buzzards and wolves. It is good. Many mustangs shall gallop to the Hondo when my white brothers and Sun Hair go back. Sun Hair is a child of the Great Spirit, but she must not steal Shooting Star from his red brother. Rattlesnake has spoken."

"Do not fear, my red friend. Your white brother will never desert you. We shall always be where we can see each other, and very often I hope. I am sure that we four ought always to be the best of friends. Come, we have been eating and drinking while you have been fasting. Will you take some wine?" And Laura motioned to the Tonkaway to be seated, as she filled his glass.

"The fire-water of the whites has turned the war-cries of the Tonkaway's people into the babbling of squaws. Rattlesnake will not drink. His head would be heavy, and his eagle feathers would lie in the dust. He will eat the meat of the deer, and the bread of corn. They are good. It is enough."

The scouts watched the Tonkaway intently, hoping that he would make some allusion to the outlaw chief, for they knew that he had been all through the valley, and over the side of the mountain; but he partook of the food before him, without a word. Laura seated herself by his side, and attempted to do the agreeable; but this only served to confuse and embarrass the Indian, and caused him to leave the table without having satisfied his hunger. The young maiden was not aware, however, that she had in any way been interfering with his comfort and appetite.

No sooner had Rattlesnake arisen from the table than he caught sight of a little pool of blood, upon which the light from the huge hanging lamp in the cave was reflected. Pointing to it, he said quickly:

"Who kill here?"

Shooting Star explained the circumstances connected with the death of Bonita, and then grasping a brand from the fire near the door, invited the Tonkaway to follow him.

"That's ther squaw o' Devil Duke," explained Old Rocky, who joined the two as they reached the spot where the Mexican girl lay. "An' we 'uns must go an' hunt 'mong ther rocks ter see ef he air shot. Ef ther cuss gut away, we hes ter find his trail, Tonk', fer Shootin' Star wants him bad ter sign a talk-paper. Yer didn't see ther hellyun in yer meanderin's, I reckon; did yer, pard?"

Rattlesnake looked down upon the corpse, and then, stooping over ran his fingers through the long rich hair of the senorita, saying briefly:

"Heap good scalp."

"Ya-as, but we doesn't scalp weemin-folks, Tonk'."

"No scalp, no shoot," said the Indian quickly.

"Wa-al, this war a needcessity. We 'uns doesn't shoot squaws neither, but Shootin' Star hed ter do hit ter save Sun Hair's life. Do yer see jist how hit air?"

The Tonkaway said nothing, but looking around him, and seeing the dead Apaches, drew his knife, and with a ringing war-cry, proceeded to scalp them, Old Rocky having been forced to neglect doing so from so unusual a press of business. Shooting Star, seeing that nothing was to be gained from his red pard by direct questionings, returned to Laura; while the old scout held the torch for the Indian, as the latter collected the trophies he so highly prized.

"Does yer think, Tonk', we kin kerral ther cuss of a Devil Duke, or does yer s'pose he hes bin bored, an' air buzzard feed now?"

"What Shooting want of Diablo Duke? Want torture? Want scalp? Want kill?"

"Wa-al, I reckon he'd tortur' him some ef he had a holt on him, ter make ther cuss spit biz. Then, arter he'd gut him ter sign a talk-paper, he'd kill him dead sure, fer Devil Duke hev bin ther means o' shovin' a power o' misery onter our pard. Ya-as, I reckon he'd giv him a lingerin' ticket fer t'other world, an' I don't think he c'd shove tortur' enough onter him ter git even on ther deal either. That's what I think. But, dog my cats, Tonk', I'm es sleepy es an owl at sun-up!"

"Rattlesnake never sleep on war-path," said the Indian. "Old Rocky stay here in cave. Rattlesnake look for trail."

With these few words, the Tonkaway glided away in the darkness.

"Wa-al, dod-blast hit, I reckon I'm gittin' old an' played out o' late, fer my pards seems ter take hit inter ther heads ter leave me alone purty frequent an' often. Howsomever, I'm stiff an' sore climbin' rocks, an' sides I reckon I kin scrouge down a leetle more dried beef. Dang'd ef I don't scrimmage roun' fer some coffee. I c'd drink 'bout half a gallon 'bout now, an' not wink twic' while ther fluid war stompedin' down my throat."

Thus soliloquizing, the old scout returned to the inner cave-chamber, where Shooting Star and Laura Libby were seated side by side, engaged in earnest conversation.

"Where is Rattlesnake?" inquired the young scout.

"He hev levanted ter smell roun' arter Devil Duke's trail, an' I'm a-goin' on a lone scout fer some coffee. I'll turn ther bull shebang over ter find some, yer kin bet yer int'rest in Monte-zummy."

Shooting Star and Laura Libby laughed heartily at the earnestness, almost approaching suffering, that was imprinted on the face of the old scout as he spoke, and then passed on toward the cabinet.

A moment after they saw him mounted upon a chair, and having a bag in his hand, which he had taken from a high shelf, and his face was perfectly aglow with joy as he tested its contents with his olfactory.

"By ther jumpin' Jericho! I hes struck hit rich; an' I'll be ready, arter I hes made a mess o' Rio, ter strike out on ther long trail, ef so hit's on ther p'ogram."

And Old Rocky sprang down, replenished the fire, and placed a large tin pot which he had found, full of the favorite and only prized beverage of the plains, upon the glowing coals.

But, while the old scout is brewing and enjoying his coffee to the fullest extent, let us follow the Tonkaway.

When Rattlesnake left the cave it was early in the morning. The sun was just peeping above the horizon, as the Indian advanced with hasty strides beyond the cedars, and then cast a piercing glance here and there about the valley. But all was silent, and naught living was in view, except a score or two of red-jowled buzzards, that were soaring with arched necks turned downward, as they gazed upon their prospective feast amid the rocks on the mountain side.

Satisfied that none of Lone Wolf's war-party could be in the vicinity—for if they had been, they would now be striving to regain their dead—Rattlesnake darted here and there, sculpting the slain braves, and chanting all the while in a monotonous voice an exultant war-song.

Having gathered all the trophies of war, he now made his way to the little clump of cedars above the entrance to the cavern, and stood before his captive, the bandit chief, Devil Duke.

Effectually gagged, and fast bound though he was, the outlaw writhed in agony and shrank with horror, when he saw his dreaded enemy standing in front of him; doubtless imagining the terrible tortures which possibly, and probably, were in store for him. He had been merciless himself, and he well knew now that there was no mercy for him lurking within the red breast upon which was painted the horrible and suggestive totem.

The Tonkaway witnessed the emotion of the outlaw chief with disdain and contempt for some seconds; then, stooping, he pulled off the boots of Devil Duke, and threw them aside. This done, he unbound him from the tree, and forced him down the rocks, and into the cave.

Entering without noise the outer cave-chamber, the Indian led the bandit chief through the darkness to where, within a few feet of them, the corpse of the Mexican girl lay, and then again secured him.

Striding into the inner apartment, just as the old scout had poured down his second immense cup of coffee, Rattlesnake again stood before his friends.

"Wa-al, dog-goned ef yer didn't gi'n me a start clean ter ther marrer, Tonk'," exclaimed Old Rocky, springing up and clapping his hand on his revolver, as he spoke, while Shooting Star also jumped up and caught his rifle.

"How-dy, Rattlesnake?" said the young scout, the moment he recognized his red pard. "We didn't look for you back quite so soon. I thought at first that some straggling Apache had concluded to look in upon us."

"Apache shoot first, then sound war-cry," was the somewhat scornful cry of the Tonkaway.

CHAPTER XXV.

AS IT SHOULD BE.

"WA-AL, I reckon yer is 'bout kerrect, Tonk'; but we 'uns is kinder broke down and fluster-cated, an' thet air liable ter knock reg'lar biz outen our brain-boxes. But what's ther racket outside? What's up?"

As the old scout made his apologetic remarks, his Indian pard looked at him in a significant manner, and then pointed over his shoulder.

"Shooting Star get torch. Old Rocky get torch. Sun Hair get torch. Come!"

With these directions, Rattlesnake himself

picked a burning brand from the fire, and stood waiting until the others had in the same way secured their torches; and then led the way into the adjoining apartment, directly to the bandit chief, before whom he halted, and held the flaming pine-knot over and in front of his head. The recognition was instant on the part of all.

"Wa-al, dog-gone my half-sister's black cat! Set me down fer a Greaser ef ther Tonk' hain't kerral'd ther cuss arter all! Bully fer her!"

"Heaven be praised!" exclaimed Shooting Star. "At last, Duke Darrow, you are in my power—in the power of him you sought to ruin, and whose life, for years, you have made a burden and a curse to him! Prepare yourself for death; for, by the Eternal! you shall never see the light of day again!"

Laura Libby gave a cry of horror, as the wolf-like gaze of the miserable wretch was fastened upon her. Never before, perhaps, was a man so completely overpowered with astonishment and baffled rage as was the outlaw chief; for he had felt the utmost certainty that Bonita would kill Laura as soon as she ascertained that the band was broken up, and when he had seen that the Tonkaway was alone, he was led to believe that the two scouts, whom he so much dreaded, had been slain by the Apaches when they burst into the cavern. But, at this moment, he caught sight of the corpse of the Mexican girl, lying nearly at his feet, her features convulsed with fiendish hate, now frozen in death, and a shudder of horror ran through his frame at the unexpected sight.

"Duke Darrow!" exclaimed the young scout, in a clear, calm voice, "will you sign a paper confessing that you murdered Colonel Lawrence Libby with a knife of mine, upon which was engraved my name, and which you obtained possession of in some manner, unknown to me? Also, that you robbed me of ten thousand dollars in gold on the same night, after first having attempted to assassinate me—crimes which forced me to fly from home and friends, an outlaw, although innocent of having wronged any human being? Take the gag from his mouth, Rattlesnake. I cannot go near the wretch, for I should kill him where he stands! Will you, Duke Darrow, sign such a paper?"

"No, never!" yelled the bandit chief, bracing up with a look of desperation upon his face.

The form of Charles Audley trembled with rage. Knife and pistol were clutched as in a vise, while his muscles were drawn into huge knots and his face convulsed with the most intense passion. Still he glared at Devil Duke without a movement.

The oppressive silence, which bound all for the time, was suddenly broken by the Tonkaway, who addressed himself to the old scout:

"My brother will untie the hands of the bad white chief. Diablo Duke will sign talk-paper. Rattlesnake has said it, and lies build not their nests on his tongue."

With these words, the Indian stalked through the main cavern and passed out into the world.

"Git yer paper draw'd up, pard. Ther Tonk' means biz, as usual."

Glancing at Old Rocky, while the latter was speaking, the young scout turned about and went into the inner cave, followed by Laura, who was trembling like an aspen, and opening a drawer of the cabinet, took therefrom pen, ink and paper.

He then seated himself at the table and drew up the confession in nearly the same words which he had used to the outlaw chief; Laura, all the while, bending over him, her mind filled with presentiments of coming evil. Writing rapidly, it took but a short time to complete the document; he then took the pen and ink with him into the outer apartment, and there took up his former position, Laura by his side, as pale as death.

Old Rocky had meanwhile loosened the hands of the outlaw, and bound him with a lariat about his waist. Devil Duke looked haggard and worn, but desperate and defiant as ever, as he rubbed his wrists where the cords had impeded circulation.

All at once the bandit chief ceased chafing his wrists, his face became of a perfectly ashen hue, and he trembled from head to foot, as he cast his burning and bloodshot eyes toward the point at which the Tonkaway had disappeared.

His defiant look vanished, and all looked toward the entrance of the cavern to seek an explanation of the sudden change in the captive, but there was no one in view.

Five minutes more passed, and then, through the silence of the cave could be detected the light sound of the pest of the prairies; and the next instant the Tonkaway glided noiselessly into the chamber, holding tightly grasped in each hand a huge writhing rattlesnake, coiling and uncoiling about his brawny arms, and their hissing heads projecting from his hands. Only one quick glance did the outlaw chief give; then a shrill, piercing scream of the most abject terror and dread burst from his parched throat.

"Hold him back! Hold the red fiend back! I'll sign the paper! I'll sign it!"

Thus yelled Devil Duke, his eyes bulging from their sockets, and his form quivering.

Shooting Star handed the document he had

drawn up, with ink and pen, to Old Rocky, who placed them before the bandit chief upon a small table which he found near at hand; and Devil Duke, grasping the pen, thrust it into the ink-stand, and affixed his name to the paper. A brief silence followed his act, and then Shooting Star addressed him:

"To provide against the possible loss of this paper, I now ask you before these witnesses—Did you not murder Colonel Libby, the crime which I have been charged with?"

"Yes!" shrieked Devil Duke, as the Tonkaway, still holding the writhing snakes, made another step toward him.

"Did you not steal my saddle-bags containing ten thousand dollars in gold on the same night in which you shot at me and killed Colonel Lawrence Libby?"

Again the Indian made a forward movement.

"Yes!" yelled the outlaw chief. At this moment, although as pale as death, and evidently faint from the strange and horrible sights and proceedings, Laura Libby, clinging to her lover's arm, whispered in his ear, and he nodded his head in acquiescence.

"Did you not rob the safe of the man whom you murdered, about a year after you committed that dastardly deed, and at the same time persecuted his daughter, who now stands before you, striving to induce her to link her life with the wretch who murdered her father?"

Devil Duke hesitated for a moment, but during that moment the Tonkaway had reached his side, and the heads of the terrible serpents were within four inches of his face.

"Yes!" he shrieked, in horror, his teeth chattering, his eyes bulging from their sockets, and gasps bursting from his throat.

Laura shrank back into the shadows. The sight, with all that it recalled, was too much for even her nerve and endurance.

"That'll do now, Tonk," said the old scout. "We is much 'bleeged ter yer fer findin' a way ter fotch ther cuss roun' ter biz. Ther snakes hes skeered Laury 'bout outen her seven senses. I'd let 'em hev free range outside, ef I war you. They's done good service, an' oughtn't ter be killed."

The Tonkaway withdrew his persuaders, but presently returned.

Shooting Star, with a stern, determined look upon his face, now appeared with a huge armful of pine-knots, and soon had the same in a bright blaze on one side of the apartment. He then stripped off his jaqueta, which he threw upon the floor, drew his bowie, and called out:

"Duke Darrow, I shall give you a fair fight, although I warn you that you *must* die. I shall kill you; for the God of justice will nerve my arm. Let him loose, old pard, and do you guard the entrances."

"Charley! Charley! For God's sake—for my sake, do not fight him! Do not risk your life against such a fiend."

Thus pleaded Laura Libby, clinging to the arm of her lover, but his face showed no change.

"Shootin' Star, ole pard, I wouldn't tackle ther cuss ef I war you. Hyer's me an' ther Tonk' hain't gut nobody ter cry fer us. Let ary one o' us kinder play jab with him, ef hit's gut ter be did; though I goes in fer puttin' him up a limb without givin' no more show nor he's many a time gi'n ter better men. Less do hit!"

"I tell you, Old Rocky, I am determined, and nothing can change me. I have sworn to have the villain's heart's blood. I am no murderer, and this is the way I intend to keep my oath. Let Duke Darrow loose and give him a knife. Laura, my darling, go into the inner cave, and have no fear for me. I'll join you soon, and without a scratch."

Seeing that it was worse than useless to attempt to reason with her lover, Laura threw her arms passionately around him, and then, with the tears streaming down her cheeks, rushed moaning into the inner chamber.

Old Rocky untied the lariat, placed his bowie knife in the hand of the outlaw chief, while the Tonkaway stood with drawn bow at the entrance, his eyes glittering with vengeful fury.

For a moment Devil Duke stood in his tracks, clutching the knife which the old scout had given him.

"Come on, you cowardly assassin! and for the first time in your worthless, accursed life, fight an even battle!"

Thus spoke Shooting Star, in a taunting voice; and Devil Duke advanced toward him, his form half bent, his eyes glaring with hatred, and a look of desperation upon his face.

Both men sprung forward at the same instant, meeting each other in the middle of the apartment, their knives striking with a sound—ing click.

Back and forth, here and there, they fought; neither of them seeming to gain any advantage, or even to draw blood for some time. Then Devil Duke, with an apparently revived hope bursting in upon him, began to redouble his exertions.

Arms flew with the quickness of thought; steel flashed in the firelight, and at length, by a well-directed cut, Shooting Star clipped the flesh from Devil Duke's knife hand, causing the latter for a moment to leave his guard open; then the young scout plunged his bowie to the

hilt in his enemy's breast, quickly withdrawing the weapon, and knocking up the last thrust of the outlaw chief.

With a heavy groan, Devil Duke sunk to his knees, the hot blood spurted over the rock floor from wound and mouth and nostrils; then he fell forward upon his face, dead!

The war-cry of the Tonkaway of a sudden burst exultantly from the throat of Rattlesnake.

"Dog my cats, pard! Yer hes passed him through, C. O. D., an' made a XXX fight; but I war sickes a hen wi' ther pip, fer a few fleet-in' peroids, an' I'd a heap rather played ther game myself nor held ther candle. Run ter Laury, quick an' let her know yer is right side up with care. But I wouldn't be s'prised ef she'd flopped over, an' don't know B from a mule's hinder. Tonk', ther air ther last keerd in this byer game, an' hit's played flat on ther board. I reckon we mought es well take count o' stock, an' see what we hes won, 'sides ther hosses. Howsomever, fust off I 'lows I'll irrigate my in'ards with a leetle more double-distilled coffee. Come on; I knows yer kin drink thet."

The red and white pards passed into the next room, where they found Shooting Star and Laura locked in each other's arms, the latter shedding tears of joy, and both filled with thankfulness at the thought that the clouds in their sky were now all swept away, and the future loomed up, to all human appearance, bright and beautiful.

But, reader mine, our trail is nearly at an end, and there is little now left us but to sum up the facts in regard to all that occurred to our friends in the near future, in a few brief words and then halt.

At noon of the same day, after burying Duke Darrow and Bonita in the same grave, our three prairie pards and Laura Libby were ready to take their way down the range.

A large sum of money, in doubloons and Mexican dollars, was discovered in a chest under the bed of Devil Duke; which together with many other valuables and a large stock of arms, were packed upon the most gentle of the horses. These were driven by Old Rocky; and Laura, a side-saddle having been found for her in the cave, was enabled to join the cavalcade. Shooting Star and Rattlesnake took charge of the herd of mustangs that had belonged to the outlaws; and the next day, at noon, they all entered the bend on the Houdo, where they found the wagon-train.

Great was the surprise and joy with which Laura was welcomed back, as from the dead; her mother having been a most insane with grief, and the men of the train, led by her uncle, having scoured the country in all directions in search of her. It was found that the Apaches, in their descent upon the camp, when they held Laura captive, had murdered the wife of one of the teamsters and two children. In spite of the many mishaps which had so far befallen him, Laura's uncle decided to hold the fort, and Old Rocky and Rattlesnake volunteered to remain and protect the little settlement, as long as any danger should threaten from war-parties. A block-house was erected, as well as suitable dwellings for the teamsters; and, when Laura had recovered from the effects of her terrible experience, she, in company with Charles Audley, her mother, Old Rocky, and the Tonkaway, made a trip to San Antonio, all putting up at the Menger House, on the Alamo Plaza. The next day, the rites of holy matrimony were celebrated between our heroine and him who had so long been known only as Shooting Star.

The confession of Duke Darrow, alias Devil Duke, the outlaw chief, was duly published in the *San Antonio Herald*, the document itself being sent to the authorities at the scene of his early crimes, near the mouth of the Brazos. This effectually removed the last shade of suspicion from Charles Audley, and caused the fond old father, who had never ceased to have confidence in his son, to renew his youth.

The young couple made a wedding-tour to their old home, and Charles induced his father to dispose of his property in Eastern Texas, and return with them to the Houdo.

The gold which had been found in the outlaws' cave was divided equally between the trio of scouts; but Old Rocky and the Tonkaway insisted upon their pard, Shooting Star, retaining and using their share in building and stocking the little settlement on the Rio Houdo.

In due course of time, the bend and its vicinity became quite a village, Charles Audley being the man of means within its limits, and "Sun Hair," otherwise Laura Audley, nee Libby, being the most beautiful in that portion of the State.

Old Rocky and Rattlesnake at times prevailed upon their old pard, Shooting Star—for so they still persisted in calling him—to accompany them on long hunts. Frequently, too, they would go out on the trail of Apache, or Comanche war-parties; and, on such occasions, the trio of pards—as the reader will be prepared to believe—did good service to the State. Especially was this the case with "Rattlesnake, the Terrible Tonkaway."

THE END.

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